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Portraits of the Artist as Mother: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth*

by

Kristina Ann Lundberg ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Portraits of the Artist as Mother: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* submitted by Kristina Ann Lundberg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of the writer who is also a mother in Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners* and her memoir *Dance on the Earth*. The Introduction emphasizes the centrality of the roles of mother and writer to both Laurence and her protagonist Morag Gunn, and asserts the need to conceive of the mother-figure as a potential creator of art: the mother writing, rather than the mother written. Chapter One discusses the metaphor comparing writing to childbirth and how Laurence reappropriates that metaphor from male writers. Chapter Two is concerned with the ways in which writing and motherhood conflict and considers whether a balance can ever be achieved. The Conclusion asserts that Laurence, regardless of the flaws in her portrayals of the mother-writer, has painted a portrait of the artist as a mother that is, overall, a step forward in the area of women's writing.

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INTRODUCTION

"Lucky me. I've got my work to take my mind off my life" (12), thinks Morag Gunn at the beginning of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974). Her "work" is writing, while her "life," in this instance, is being a mother worried about the disappearance of her daughter Pique. As much as Morag would like to separate these two realms of existence, however, writing and motherhood are constantly paralleled and intertwined, as well as placed in direct conflict with each other, throughout the novel. Such is the case also in regard to Laurence's own life, as is revealed in her posthumously published memoir *Dance on the Earth* (1989).

Both *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* are *künstlerromane*. A *künstlerroman*, as defined by Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is an "artist-novel" (118), or "a novel in which the central character is an artist of any kind" (118). Such a novel often traces the development of its protagonist's artistic sensibilities. Indeed, both *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* depict Morag's and Laurence's growth into artistry, from childhood to full maturity at the conclusion of each text, in some detail.

Like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), one of the most well-known *künstlerromane* dealing with a writer, or like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* are also *bildungsromane*, following "the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 24). Morag's and Laurence's growth into womanhood and their growth as writers are portrayed equally.

In "The Woman as Artist in Twentieth-Century Fiction," Marsha Stanfield Bordner designates the period in which *The Diviners* was written as a period in which interest in the female artist-figure was intense: "During the 1960s and '70s the fictional character of the woman as artist has reemerged as an important figure and has captured the interest of contemporary women. This character sometimes appears as a painter or musician but most often as a writer" (4). This, of course, is due to the growing number of women writers, such as Laurence herself, and their own self-interest, which is comparable to the traditional male fascination with themselves as artists. Laurence's *A Bird in the House*, a collection of short stories centering around aspiring writer Vanessa MacLeod, and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, another Canadian collection of linked stories about a future female writer, Del Jordan, are other contemporary examples of this interest in the female artist.

Just as the stories of David Copperfield and Stephen Dedalus, far from depicting the isolated artist-figure locked in his own mind, are furnished with familial issues, romantic/sexual attachments, and other concerns that do not directly relate to each protagonist's path to becoming an artist, the stories of female artists also deal with these women's experiences of life in addition to art, particularly the experiences that are unique to females. As Bordner writes, "The new sensitivity of the female novelists of the 1960s and '70s to biological role leads not only to a depiction of the woman artist as wife and mother but to the various concerns of women artists from adolescence to old age" (11). Of course, the fundamental unique experience of the female is her experience of her sexuality, her body, and the functions and capacities of that body.

It is evident that Laurence, in her desire to portray the development of an artist, does not want to deny, or indeed sacrifice, the unique experiences of a woman's body; she clearly realizes that an intelligent and sensitive portrayal of the female artist should take her femaleness, both the restricting and the rewarding aspects of it—the things that make it different from the story of a male artist—into account. Not only does she take Morag's sexuality and reproductive capacity into account, she also uses Morag's experiences as a mother both to enrich Morag's experiences as an artist and to suggest that a female artist's experience of her artistry may be as unique (in comparison with a male artist) as that of her sexuality. This is clearly a phenomenon that she has recognized in her own life and that she reveals in *Dance on the Earth*.

Patricia Morley, in "Engel, Wiseman, Laurence: Women Writers, Women's Lives," states that "Morag's centre is her writing and her child" (162). Indeed, Morag's roles as writer and as mother are given equal time, both in *The Diviners* itself and in the criticism of the novel. More significantly, these two roles are constantly interwoven and compared throughout the novel, an aspect of *The Diviners* that has been mostly neglected by critics—despite the fact that Morag as a mother and Morag as a writer, separately, have each been discussed thoroughly. For example, in "You Have To Go Home Again: Art and Life in *The Diviners*," J. A. Wainwright, while recognizing "[t]he intensity of Margaret Laurence's conviction in *The Diviners* that the artist *must* investigate the relationship between her art and her life" (293), fails to examine the striking parallels between Morag's writing and her life as a mother. Helen M. Buss and Barbara Godard come closer to acknowledging

such parallels, but tend to shy away from asserting a direct metaphorical connection between writing and motherhood. Buss's thesis is that "[i]n *The Diviners* we find how a creative relationship of mother and daughter is integrated with the artistic process itself" (54); yet her focus is on Pique as an inspiration to Morag the artist or as an inheritor of Morag's artistry, rather than on a consideration of Pique as analogous to the writing itself. Godard, on the other hand, does acknowledge the ways in which Morag "mothers" both her daughter and her novels, but her outlining of this metaphor is limited to only the most metafictional (the "writing about writing") aspects of the novel and does not take into consideration the larger existence of a writer beyond the act of writing itself.

It is more difficult to ignore the issues that arise from the dual identity of mother and writer in *Dance on the Earth*, as Laurence makes it explicit that "this is a book about my mothers and about myself as a mother and writer" (8). Clearly, motherhood (both being mothered and mothering) is an integral part of Laurence's identity as a writer; or, at least, it is an integral part of the portrait of the writer that she aims to paint: She asserts that she is supported and encouraged by her mothers (her biological mother, her stepmother, and her mother-in-law), while she is inspired and challenged positively by her own children. As Nora Foster Stovel discusses, the importance of motherhood to Laurence's life as a writer is indicated in the very structure of *Dance on the Earth*, which is organized in chapters named after each mother and, finally, Margaret herself; each chapter, alongside of saluting each of these mothers, also deals with the development of Laurence as a writer.

In the memoir, Laurence calls *The Diviners* her "spiritual autobiography" (6, 208), meaning that, while it is "not precisely an autobiography" (6), Morag and Laurence share similar experiences and feelings and Laurence feels an affinity with her protagonist. Thus, it is interesting and useful to consider these two roles that Morag and Laurence have in common, mothering and writing, in tandem. Laurence's relation of motherhood to writing, both in *The Diviners* and in *Dance on the Earth*, takes three forms: First, a somewhat romantic paralleling; second, a realistic depiction of the ways in which the two conflict with each other; and, third, an attempt to assert an ultimate balance between the romantic and the realistic.

The paralleling of motherhood and writing, found mostly in *The Diviners*, is based on the traditional male metaphor that asserts that producing a piece of writing is like giving birth to a child. Clearly, this is a male appropriation of a fundamentally female experience for the purpose of describing their own acts of artistic creation, and perhaps to attempt to elevate such acts of creation while at the same time denigrating literal pregnancy and childbirth. Margaret Homans, in *Bearing the Word*, theorizes that females "are identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language" (4), while males are associated with "the acts of figuration that constitute literature" (4); while figurative speech indicates an attempt—indeed, a desire—to reach the "absent referent," the very absence of the referent (the female) is necessary to language and the creation of literature. Women, then, are shut out of the realm of language and literature and relegated to the realm of the literal; thus, the term "the absent mother" (which is discussed by Di Brandt in regard to *The Diviners*) is created. Moreover, acts of figuration are valued more

highly than the literal; applied to pregnancy, then, the male act of using pregnancy as a metaphor is elevated above the literal female experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

Laurence's reaction to this inappropriate use of such a metaphor by male writers is not to deny the basis of the metaphor, but to reappropriate it for her own writer-mother protagonist. In such a way, she can adapt the metaphor to the woman's experience as an artist, and is able to give the metaphor a significance and a poignancy that are not available to the male writers who make use of the metaphor. She can also, in regard to Homan's argument, demonstrate the feminine capacity for figurative language and literary production while at the same time equally valuing the literal capacity of reproduction.

From her own life, however, Laurence realizes that the metaphor, while appropriate and effective in her work of fiction, is a romanticization of the experience of the writer who is also a mother. Her own experience, depicted in *Dance on the Earth*, reveals the conflict between the two roles, which are not always in harmony as the metaphor would suggest. Quite the contrary, attempting to balance the two often seems to her like "an impossible juggling act" (157), and, although she desires to occupy both roles, it is a struggle to do so: "I always wanted both: children and the chance to write. And I had both, though at a price" (137), Laurence writes. James King's recent biography of Laurence considers this issue: In his Preface, he stresses that Laurence "was deeply troubled by the conflict between being female and a writer, between being a wife and a writer, and between being a mother and a writer" (xx).

"I have been blessed, with my children, with my work" (222), concludes Laurence in *Dance on the Earth*. This is an explicit reiteration of a theme that has been suggested throughout the memoir: Mothering and writing are both essential parts of Laurence's being, and, despite the struggle, she feels lucky—even "blessed"—that she has both. A balance between the romantic and the realistic portrayals of one's life as a mother-writer is sought, and seemingly achieved. This balance has much to do with Laurence's conception of each role being a "gift" or a "grace." In a letter to fellow Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, also a mother, Laurence compares writing with children on this basis: Each, she writes, is "[a] gift, given to you by life, undeserved like all grace is undeserved by its very nature, and not to be owned" (*A Very Large Soul* 3-4). The balance that is seemingly struck also has much to do with the notion that art emerges from conflict, or that life is the stuff of art: the challenge of raising children, as well as the children themselves, are sources of inspiration. Thus, women have a whole well of experience from which to draw that is not available to men, and this, Laurence asserts, enriches women's writing: "I don't believe . . . that [the challenges of motherhood have] made women's writing less powerful, less broad in scope. In fact, I believe the reverse is true. If I hadn't had my children, I wouldn't have written more and better, I would have written less and worse" (166).

It is important to note, however, that we will never know what the quantity nor the quality of Laurence's writing would have been if she had not had children; nor could she herself ever have known. Therefore, her statement immediately opens itself to challenging. More importantly, we must read such a statement with the

critical skepticism that should accompany the reading of any autobiographical piece of writing. For between reality, or "truth," and the documented version of that experience is the "I," who, as Sidonie Smith discusses, is both the subject and the narrator of the autobiography. This "I," or what Smith calls the *autos* (one's sense of identity), complicates our reading of the *bios* (experience) that is recorded by the autobiography by involving his or her skewed perceptions of "what really happened," a tendency to recreate his or her own history, and his or her natural desire to portray himself or herself favourably. As Smith notes, study of autobiography has shifted from a focus on the *bios*, where the autobiography critic acted as "[a] kind of moralist" (5) and "evaluated the quality of life as it was lived and the veracity of the autobiographer as he or she narrated the story of that life" (5), to a questioning of the *autos* and the "agonizing questions inherent in self-representation" (5). The question, then, becomes whether or not Laurence, the subject of her own narrative, herself believed that her own writing would have been worse without her children; or is this balance that she paints another form of romanticization of motherhood and writing, a romanticization that is masked by the claim of truth inherent in the autobiographical form?

In his recent biography of Margaret Laurence, James King presents a woman who was far more artistically driven than she presents herself. While she continually emphasizes that she had two careers—mothering and writing—King reveals that her two children felt "they had paid an unfair price for her creativity" (334), and he labels her assertion that she divided her energies and her devotion equally between her books and her children "a bit of wishful thinking" (375). He also makes the

provocative assertion that writing "allowed [Laurence] to mother herself" (273), thereby raising the question of how a woman who was mother to both her books and, through her writing, to herself could also be an effective, full-time mother to her children.

In light of these revelations about Laurence as mother, we return to the memoir, and even to the fiction, with a sense of the unresolvable ambivalence that a mother-writer may feels toward her children—an ambivalence that Laurence tries to smooth over. This maternal ambivalence is discussed effectively by Susan Rubin Suleiman, who challenges the psychoanalytic conception of the mother as a sacrificial and consistently loving being and suggests that mothers, especially mothers who are also trying to do artistic work, are characterized by ambivalent feelings toward their children—an ambivalence that corresponds "perhaps to the opposition between the mother's need to affirm her self as writer and the child's need (or her belief in the child's need) for her selflessness" (366). As Adrienne Rich expresses, "[m]y children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alteration between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (1).

Laurence's fiction reveals that she is, indeed, aware of this maternal ambivalence. For example, Stacey, the protagonist of Laurence's novel *The Fire-Dwellers*, thinks about her children: "They nourish me and yet they devour me, too" (20). Such ambivalence simmers below the surface narrative of *The Diviners*, also, manifesting itself, for example, in the recurring motif of abortion and Morag's preoccupation with the act.

All of Laurence's portrayals of the mother-writer—paralleling the two roles, revealing how the two roles pull against each other, and ultimately asserting that women's writing has much to gain from the experience of motherhood—work to assert Laurence's desired thesis: "The fact is that being a woman writer and a mother is very different from being a male writer and a father" (*Dance on the Earth* 135). The relatively recent acceptance of female writer-mothers writing about motherhood, particularly in *künstlerroman* form, has made such portrayals possible. As Ursula K. Le Guin notes in her essay "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book," "we don't know much about the process, because writers who are mothers haven't talked much about their motherhood—for fear of boasting? for fear of being trapped in the Mom trap, discounted?--nor have they talked much about their writing as in any way connected with their parenthood" (35).

Suleiman, in her essay "Writing and Motherhood," calls for a discourse of motherhood, a discourse that she believes should have a stronger voice in the depiction of artistry. She laments the fact that theories of creation, especially psychoanalytic theories, "invariably place the artist, man or woman, in the position of the child" (357). For instance, she discusses Melanie Klein's theory that "the mother—or rather, the mother's body—functions as a 'beautiful land' to be explored. The creative writer, like the explorer, the scientist, the artist in general, is impelled by the 'desire to re-discover the mother of the early days, whom [he] has lost actually or in [his] feelings.' The work of art itself stands for the mother's body, destroyed repeatedly in fantasy but restored or 'repaired' in the act of creation" (357). In this way, the figure of the mother becomes the impetus for creation, but not the creator

herself: "*Mothers don't write, they are written*" (356). "It is time to let mothers have their word" (360), Suleiman asserts.

Laurence, seeing herself as being finally in possession of her "true voice as a woman writer" (*Dance on the Earth* 5) and mother, does not hesitate to paint her own portrait of the artist—a portrait that may aptly be titled "A Portrait of the Artist as a Mother"—through the fictional Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*. She also does so through the living of her own life, a life which is depicted in *Dance on the Earth*. These portraits are of the woman writing, not only as a child in search of her own mother but as a mother herself. Even the subtext of her own life and Morag's life—the maternal ambivalence—that Laurence does not acknowledge, adds shading to the portrait of the female artist that Laurence actively paints. Through both these genres—the fictional and the autobiographical—Laurence presents us with a lasting image of the writer as mother and the mother as writer.

CHAPTER I: THE REAPPROPRIATION OF THE METAPHOR OF WRITING AS GIVING BIRTH IN *THE DIVINERS*

"[W]riting books is the closest men ever come to childbearing" (40). This declaration, made by Norman Mailer in "Mr. Mailer Interviews Himself," makes explicit a metaphor that has been used many times in the literary tradition: producing a piece of writing is like producing a child. For example, Charles Dickens, in his Preface to *David Copperfield*, writes, "Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is *David Copperfield*" (47). Ben Jonson reverses the metaphor, still suggesting an equality between literature and children and his role in the creation of each, when, in his poem "On My First Son," he refers to his dead child as "his best piece of poetry" (l. 10). James Joyce, too, invokes the comparison in a letter to his wife, paralleling the writing of his book with her pregnancies: "sitting at the table, thinking of the book I have written, the child which I have carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination as you carried in your womb the children you love, and of how I had fed it day after day out of my brain and memory" (202-3). The metaphor also serves Joyce in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the act of literary creation is described as follows: "In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh" (209-10).

Indeed, the comparison of writing with giving birth has become a central metaphor in the "portrait of the artist," particularly of the writer. This "portrait,"

however, is a portrait of the male artist, as can be seen in the preceding examples: the female capacity for pregnancy and childbirth is used, in each case, by a male to describe, and perhaps even to elevate, his own act of creation. Clearly, this is an appropriation—an inappropriate claiming—of female experience by male writers. In her novel *The Diviners*, however, Margaret Laurence reappropriates this metaphor for her protagonist Morag Gunn, who is both a mother and a writer; in other words, Laurence takes back the metaphor comparing literary production with reproduction, giving it new significance and poignancy and highlighting the inappropriate male borrowing of the metaphor.

Laurence also, through her use of the metaphor, repositions—or, more accurately, revalues—women as writers and as mothers. In her book *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans discusses the traditional, psychoanalytic conception of woman's (especially mother's) place in language acquisition and use: she is both necessarily absent and necessarily desired.

> For the same reason that women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematics of gender . . ., women are also identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language. From the point of view of this myth, the literal both makes possible and endangers the figurative structures of literature. That we might have access to some original ground of meaning is the necessary illusion that empowers the acts of figuration that constitute literature . . . At the same time, literal meaning would hypothetically destroy any text it actually entered by making superfluous those very figures—and even, some would argue, all language acts. (4)

Thus, because the literal is desired (a desire that manifests itself in the use of figurative language by attempting to represent the literal) but must never be achieved, the mother who is associated with that literal language must also be "absent." Homans also emphasizes the higher value given to the use of figurative language (which is male) versus literal language (which is female):

> [T]he differential valuations of literal and figurative originate in the way our culture constructs masculinity and femininity, for if the literal is associated with the feminine, the more highly valued figurative is associated with the masculine. To take something literally is to get it wrong, while to have a figurative understanding of something is the correct intellectual stance. (5)

To summarize, then, Homans theorizes that females "are identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language" (4), while males are associated with "the acts of figuration that constitute literature" (4). While figurative speech indicates an attempt—indeed, a desire—to reach the "absent referent," the very absence of the referent (the female/mother) is seen as necessary to language and the creation of literature: "the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and of culture" (2). Women, then, are shut out of the realm of language and literature and relegated to the realm of the literal.

Moreover, acts of figuration are valued more highly than the literal; applied to pregnancy, then, the male act of using pregnancy as a metaphor is elevated above the literal female experience of pregnancy and childbirth. This is revealed in Joyce's description of the act of writing in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "In the

virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh" (209-10). Masculine creation—the use of literary, figurative language—becomes God-like. It also becomes virginal, like an immaculate conception. Literal, physical, sexual pregnancy and childbirth—the experience of women—then is denigrated, placed below male artistry.

Homans also discusses this theory of acquisition and use of figurative language in terms of the positioning of daughters/women in the realm of language: Because the daughter must never renounce her mother as the son must "[t]he daughter . . . speaks two languages at once. Along with symbolic language, she retains the literal or presymbolic language that the son represses at the time of his renunciation of his mother. Just as there is for the daughter no oedipal 'crisis,' her entry into the symbolic order is only a gradual shift of emphasis" (13). Homans emphasizes that this identification with two modes of language is significant in the study of women's writing:

> This alternative story of human development, this story about a daughter's long continuation of her preoedipal attachment to her mother, and of her embracing the Law of the Father so much less enthusiastically than the son, has important consequences for the writing of daughters, for the ways women rewrite the story of language. (13)

It could be said that Laurence, by emphasizing her protagonist's sense both of the nuances of figurative language and the capacities of her body, "speaks" both figuratively and literally. By reappropriating the metaphor of writing as giving birth and applying it to a mother-artist, Laurence can demonstrate the feminine capacity

(both her own and her protagonist's) for figurative language and literary production while at the same time equally valuing the literal capacity of reproduction: She asserts a place for women in the literary realm and simultaneously elevates literal motherhood.

Laurence is not alone in her sense of the inappropriateness of the male use of the metaphor comparing their writing with pregnancy and childbirth and her sense of the ways in which this metaphor works to demean mothers while elevating male artists. Feminist critics of recent decades have reacted to the rampant use of this metaphor by male writers, for the first time challenging the metaphor that has become so prevalent that it is almost a "dead" one that passes largely unnoticed and certainly unexamined. For example, Erica Jong's essay "Creativity vs. Generativity: The Unexamined Lie" is devoted to taking this metaphor apart. Jong responds to the comment made by Joyce in the letter to his wife by emphasizing that "[t]he comparison of human gestation to human creativity is by now a conventional metaphor—as largely unexamined as the dead metaphors in our everyday speech . . .—but it is also thoroughly inexact" (27). Jong calls the comparison of writing with giving birth "the paradox of artistic creativity vs. biological generativity" (28), and she asserts that "[o]nly a man (or a woman who had never been pregnant) would compare creativity to maternity, pregnancy to the creation of a poem or novel" (27).

Margaret Laurence is neither a man nor a woman who has never experienced pregnancy, childbirth, and ongoing motherhood. Yet, in *The Diviners*, we can see many subtle interactions and even parallels—though never direct, explicit comparisons—set up between the experiences Morag derives from writing and those

she derives from being a mother. To suggest parallels is, by no means, to assert that the two roles are interchangeable or that the experiences mirror each other: Laurence is just as conscious as Jong of the fundamental differences between being a writer and having a child. Nevertheless, the well-read Laurence is most likely attuned to the male tradition of equating their writing with giving birth—much like the way Lachlan MacLachlan, Morag's editor at the *Manawaka Banner*, borrows the condition of pregnancy to describe his own illness: "God help me, I have all the symptoms of a pregnant woman this morning" (170). Rather than vehemently denying the basis of the comparison between writing and giving birth, however, Laurence reappropriates the metaphor, taking advantage of her female protagonist to give the metaphor a new vibrance and, in the process, painting a portrait of the artist as an intensely female being.

Reappropriation of the female metaphors and images that males have traditionally appropriated for their own writing, along with the rewriting of traditional male plots and characters from a female perspective, has been a significant process in twentieth-century women's writing. Both techniques are feminist reactions to the male tradition that transform the masculine (and often misogynist) literature with which we have become familiar into a comment on the female experience as seen from female eyes. By taking back these metaphors and images and applying them to female experience, feminist writers both add new poignancy and depth to the metaphors that have become stale with overuse and point to the inappropriateness of the male claiming of such metaphors, as Laurence attempts to do in *The Diviners*. Rather than declaring that the metaphor comparing literary productivity with

reproduction is in itself inaccurate, she has chosen to invest it with a new power and poignancy that is not available to the male writers who use the metaphor in regard to themselves or their male protagonists.

The Diviners, like Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is both a *bildungsroman* (a "growing up" plot) and a *künstlerroman* (a plot concerned with the development of an artist): Morag's growth into womanhood and her path to artistry are equal concerns. More significantly, Morag's development in each role—woman (and, ultimately, mother) and writer—is paralleled with the other throughout the novel. Unlike Jong, Laurence does not see the technique of running the two roles alongside of, or even paralleling with, each other as limiting or demeaning to the depiction of either role; quite the contrary, she evidently views a consideration of the parallels between a woman's artistic endeavours and her reproductive life as enlarging, revealing, and appropriate.

Laurence undertakes the construction of Morag as equally a mother and a writer, as well as the paralleling of the two roles, very early in the novel, in the opening section. The novel is composed of flashbacks, in the form of snapshots and memorybank movies, that construct Morag's life for the reader, and the flashbacks are framed by present events. In this frame narrative, Morag is agonizing over both the disappearance of her eighteen-year-old daughter Pique and the writer's block that she is simultaneously experiencing. The two seem connected somehow, even at this early stage, although in ways that neither the reader nor Morag can articulate, understand, or even recognize. In fact, one of Morag's tasks is to recognize the connection between her writing and her daughter and to learn from that connection—

a lesson that is foreshadowed by the intimation that "Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance from [Royland the water diviner], something which would explain everything" (12).

At this point, however, she only feels that her worry over Pique is disrupting her writing, and she attempts to differentiate her two roles: "I've got too damn much work in hand to fret over Pique" (12), she thinks, and she declares, "Lucky me, I've got my work to take my mind off my life" (12). Nevertheless, we can see the melding of mother and writer in many instances in this section. One example is the humorous (and unexpected) convergence of a distraught mother and a writer sensitive to language and writing style when Morag reads Pique's goodbye note on the first page of the novel: "Well, you had to give the girl some marks for style of writing. Slightly derivative, perhaps, but let it pass. Oh jesus, it was not funny. Pique was eighteen. Only" (11). Here Morag reveals her inability to completely separate herself as writer from herself as mother; the two realms of existence encroach upon each other.

An important thing to recognize before any examination of the parallels between the writer Morag and the mother Morag can be undertaken is that Laurence is writing about a woman who wants and actively chooses to become a mother, unlike the women discussed by Jong for whom motherhood is primarily an imposition and not a choice. Jong writes that:

> For a woman artist, the choice of physical robustness coupled with fertile creativity has been particularly hard—both for psychological and practical reasons. Until the advent of dependable birth control (which is less than a

> century old) childbearing was not really optional for women except for the deliberately abstinent or accidentally sterile. Pregnancy was too compulsory to be experienced as a choice. But even after the advent of birth control, complex social and psychological forces conspired to make all but the most adamantly individualistic women marry and bear children for most of their adult lives. (28)

Laurence makes it clear that Morag is not one of those women who are compelled, by various external forces, to become mothers: she wants and needs to have a child. This active desire to be a mother is in itself a reappropriation, for traditionally motherhood, as Jong notes, has been seen as a duty or an imposition by the patriarchy, not for a woman's own pleasure but for the propagation of the species. Laurence, unlike many feminist writers who choose to react against this tradition by having their female protagonists choose not to have children, reacts against the patriarchy by putting this decision into the hands of the woman and by having her choose, actively and without outside compulsion—and, indeed, in the face of staunch opposition from her husband Brooke and the possibility of great difficulty in the future—to become a mother. Thus, we have Laurence's first point of comparison between the female artist and the mother: the moment of choice, the *revelation* (a word and an experience that Laurence is fond of using in her writing and which she personally believes in) that one wants and needs to become a mother may be usefully and appropriately compared with the decision to become a writer.

Indeed, every artist's career begins with a moment in which he or she decides to travel that path. For Laurence herself, that moment was an epiphany: "The

following episode sounds unlikely, but it is perfectly true" (74), Laurence relates in her memoir *Dance on the Earth*. "Sudden revelations aren't supposed to happen, whereas in truth, they happen quite a few times, or at least they have to me in my life. . . . A thought had just come to me, with enormous strength: I can't be a nurse; I have to be a writer. I was appalled and frightened" (74). She goes on to say, "I had no idea how many difficulties there would be, but I don't think it would have made a scrap of difference if I had known. What I realized that day was that I had a life commitment and could do no other" (75).

She documents this type of childhood revelation effectively in *The Diviners*, also, as Morag for the first time feels the force of her need to write: After receiving praise from a teacher for a story she wrote, and encouragement to submit that story to the school paper, Morag locks herself in a restroom cubicle, and "she is crying her eyes out. For what? She is not sad. She has known for some time what she has to do, but never given the knowledge to any other person or thought that any person might suspect. Now it is as though a strong hand has been laid on her shoulders. Strong and friendly. But merciless" (136).

These two passages in which two young girls learn with great force of their need to become writers are characterized by conflicting emotions: fear, shock, certainty, relief, and joy. But most of all they are characterized by an overwhelming and undeniable sense that writing is a calling, something that each must do because she wants to and because she needs to. As Marsha Stanfield Bordner writes in "The Woman as Artist in Twentieth-Century Fiction," "[t]he second self, so predominant in artist-novels, begins to make itself felt in an undeniable way" (154).

Laurence's sense that this kind of inner drive is also applicable to the choice (again, assuming that it is a choice) to become a mother is made explicit in a letter she wrote to Margaret Atwood in January of 1971, the first letter appearing in *A Very Large Soul: Selected Letters from Margaret Laurence to Canadian Writers*, edited by J. A. Wainwright. Referring to a "Women's Lib publication" (1) that Atwood had apparently sent her, Laurence writes:

> Incidentally . . . one point with which I took issue, re:some of the Women's Lib articles [was] the feeling on the part of some women that it was kind of unnatural for a woman to want to have kids. I would say that if a woman doesn't want to have kids, that is her business and hers only. But if she deeply does, that does not mean that she is not interested in anything else. I don't really feel I have to analyse my own motives in wanting children. . . . It's like (to me) asking why you want to write. Who cares? You have to, and that's that. But the kids, like the writing, belong ultimately to themselves, and not to you. In fact, they're very like the writing. A gift, given to you by life, undeserved like all grace is undeserved by its very nature, and not to be owned. (3-4)

It is interesting and useful to compare the passage documenting Morag's realization that she will be a writer with the passage in Laurence's *A Jest of God* in which that novel's protagonist, Rachel Cameron, makes a decision (and, indeed, experiences a revelation) about the pregnancy that she believes she is experiencing: "Look—it's my child, mine. And so I will have it. I will have it because I want it and because I can't do anything else" (177). Rachel's thoughts about having a child

involve the same revelatory quality as Morag's realization that she must write; both are, undoubtedly, shocked by the surfacing of a desire that neither realized was there, yet both are remarkably and happily resigned to their fate, as frightening as it may be.

Morag's own decision to become a mother comes about much later than her revelation that she wants to be a writer. In fact, her focus on becoming a writer could be said to preclude (for a time, at least) any desire to become a mother. This is because a young Morag cannot conceive of being both a successful writer and a mother: she has few models in the literary tradition to suggest to her that this is, indeed, a possibility for a woman. Also, she has subscribed to the conventional conception of the artist as a person who is isolated and unfettered. As Ursula Le Guin, in "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book," notes, the traditional view of the artist-figure involves "the idea that the artist must sacrifice himself to his art. . . . His responsibility is to work alone. This heroic stance has been taken as the norm—as natural to the artist—and artists, both men and women, who do not assume it have tended to feel a little shabby and second-rate" (35). Having children means a profound "sacrifice" and a "responsibility" to something other than one's art, especially for a mother as opposed to a father. Morag, then, equates giving birth with the death of her artistry. Faced with having to make a choice, Morag chooses to nurture her budding creativity rather than to create a future of nurturing children.

Bordner discusses this stage in the development of a female artist: "As a young woman, the potential artist becomes concerned with the various aspects of her sexual identity, many of which deter her development as an artist" (11). Bordner also notes that "[b]y exploring her sexuality, she can endanger her artistic career" (11).

This is a very real concern for the young female with artistic aspirations; it is also a concern that is irrelevant to the male artist, as he does not have to worry about becoming pregnant. As Laurence notes in *Dance on the Earth*, "it is acceptable [for men] to have sexual experiences without the responsibility of caring for children. It has never been a recognized part of any culture for women to have the same right, to have sex without responsibility" (36). A man can enjoy sexual dalliance without the cost of pregnancy and motherhood, without giving up his solitude; but this is risky for a woman.

Laurence paints this concern into her portrait of the female artist. Morag's awareness of her own female sexuality, particularly the possibility of becoming pregnant, makes her more determined not to allow being a woman to distract her from, or even make impossible, becoming a writer; in order to enjoy the same opportunities as a male artist, namely solitude and freedom and devotion to writing, Morag feels she must subdue her sexuality and deny her femaleness. When Morag's neighbour, Eva Winkler, gets pregnant accidentally, Morag considers her own future as an artist, and subsequently censures herself for engaging earlier in a reckless sexual encounter with Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre:

> Morag recalls herself two years ago, and the chance she took, was willing to take, and what might have happened if the event had worked out differently. It never occurred to her, then. Now it does. Now she knows one thing for sure. Nothing—*nothing*—is going to endanger her chances of getting out of Manawaka. (168)

At the same time, she laments the fact that "[i]t's not fair. It's the man who has to take the precautions" (168). But, nevertheless, she is from that point intensely conscious of her sexuality and how it may affect her future as an artist. She avoids sexual intercourse, "[s]cared not of sex but of getting pregnant" (204), and at one point she even vows that she will "have umpteen lovers but no husband. No kids. No stretch marks (what are *they*?)" (192).

However, shortly after this stanch declaration, she admits to her friend Ella Gerson that she does, in fact, have desires in addition to being a writer: "I want to be glamorous and adored and get married and have kids. I still try to kid myself that I don't want that. But I do. I want all that. *As well*. All I want is everything" (198). Later, during a visit to the Gerson house, Morag finds herself again in the revelatory space of a washroom, crying and experiencing a revelation about what she wants in life:

> What the hell is she crying about? . . . Because she wants her own child and doesn't believe she will ever have one? Because she wants to write a masterpiece and doesn't believe she will ever write anything which will even see the light of day? (202)

This is the first time that the depth of Morag's desire to have a child is revealed, even to herself. And it is certainly the first time that she thinks of her two desired roles—mother and writer—in tandem. The paralleling of the two roles is here emphasized by their proximity in her thoughts and by her disbelief that she will ever be successful in the creation of either a child or a work of art.

When Morag falls in love with, and marries, her English professor, Brooke Skelton, her need to have a child proclaims itself even more strongly: "to have Brooke's children—that is what she now sees is necessary in the deepest part of her being" (219). Of course, she still at this point desires to write, and believes that her marriage, and the support that she will receive within that marriage, will enable her to do so: "if she isn't attending classes, she will have time to read and also work at her own writing" (220). It seems she finally recognizes that she needs, and that it is possible, to be both writer and mother, to create both art and a child. And, given the number of successful Canadian female writers of Morag's generation who were also mothers—for example, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and Laurence herself—this is not unrealistic. This sense of one's dual role is something that Laurence herself experienced. In *Dance on the Earth*, she describes herself on the cusp of pregnancy and becoming a successful author: "I was twenty-six and totally taken up with having a baby. I was ecstatic. I also knew that I would go on and write books" (109).

Despite Morag's intense drive to become a serious writer and a devoted mother, both of these opportunities are taken out of her hands for a section of the novel: "Halls of Sion," the section which depicts her marriage to Brooke. Morag's dual attraction to Brooke—as a potential father to her children and (due to his status as an English professor and a literary critic) as a valuable aid to, and supporter of, her own writing—becomes ironic, since he fails to support her in either pursuit: As Wainwright states in "Art and Life in *The Diviners*, "Brooke patronizes Morag as a woman and as a writer" (299). This section is extremely important in the development of Morag, yet it—especially in terms of the subtle interaction between

Morag's attempts at writing and her longing to become a mother that are occurring here—has been largely neglected by critics. Nevertheless, it is significant, because Morag finds herself requiring outside male approval, and even permission, for both writing and becoming pregnant—the two roles which are to become her "centre," as Morley asserts.

When Morag expresses her desire to have children to Brooke, her intimations are always met by Brooke's attempts to change her mind. He refers to children as "[a]ccidents" (220), and he tries to convince Morag that having a child will limit and confine her: "once you have a child you'll be awfully tied down with it, don't forget. You're still very young for that kind of limited life" (240). This, clearly, is a reversal of Jong's statement that the contemporary female artist still feels great external pressure to become a mother: Morag is being denied a child by Brooke, and, therefore, her later choice to go against Brooke's wishes and become a mother will both indicate that motherhood is an essential part of her identity and that her actions are not undertaken out of a sense of duty or compulsion. At this time, Morag is put in the position of having to beg Brooke for a child and plead her case, like a child having to beg a parent for something that the parent has forbidden: "I really think we should try to have a child, Brooke? Don't you see? I really want a child of yours" (240) becomes her refrain. But, as Morag later realizes, Brooke "cannot ever say to her, finally, once and for all, that he cannot bear for her to bear a child" (265). Instead, and ironically, he takes advantage of her desire to write—a pursuit which he "allows" but neither supports nor truly encourages in any constructive way—to distract her from asking for a child: "What about your writing? Have you given it

up?" (241), he asks her when she persists in asking him when they can have a child. Again, Morag encounters the notion that a woman cannot be both a mother and a writer—that she must be either one or the other.

When Brooke tells Morag that she is "still very young," much about his attitude towards her writing and his refusal to have a child with her is revealed. Right from the beginning of their relationship he refers to her as "a child" (212), and "child" becomes his pet name for her. It is clear that Brooke is attempting to assume a father-figure role in his relationship with Morag; in turn, Morag, initially in awe of Brooke and perhaps seeking the father who she feels has been denied to her, welcomes such a relationship, but eventually comes to resent Brooke's positioning of her as "child": "I am not your child. I am your wife" (243), she tells him. As Bordner writes, "Brooke regards Morag more as his offspring or pet than a person in her own right" (156). Thus, it is understandable that he does not want Morag to have his child: Brooke already has a child, and that child is Morag herself. By giving birth to and nurturing a child, she would be asserting her own sexual maturity and capacity to take care of another human being, rather than being taken care of herself, and this is something that Brooke cannot abide. Also, as Bordner notes, "Brooke's tendency to regard Morag as a child is reflected in his attitude towards her writing" (156); although he recognizes her talent in that direction from the beginning, he essentially regards her attempts to write as a diversion, but not as a serious pursuit or calling. Her success as a writer, like her capacity to have a child, would upset the balance of the adult-child (teacher-student) relationship that is comfortable for him.

However, there is something more than his assumption of a paternal role in relation to Morag involved in Brooke's not wanting her to have a child, something that also relates to his patronizing attitude toward her writing. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, speaks of the "ancient continuing envy, awe, and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life" (40). As she theorizes, this envy usually takes "the form of hatred for every other aspect of female creativity" (40); since it is not practical to forbid pregnancy, female artistry is instead suppressed and ridiculed. Consequently, women have been thwarted in their artistic endeavours: "Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic creations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become 'like men,' or to escape from the 'real' tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing" (40).

This theory certainly helps to explain the attraction of male writers to the metaphor of giving birth as a description of their writing. As Jong writes, "perhaps the male artist's desire to equate the two [pregnancy and creativity] arises out of his envy of the female ability to generate life" (27-28). It could indeed be said that the male envy of the female capacity to bear a child results in the appropriation of the metaphor, the urge to compare and equate their own acts of artistic creation with the creation of new life. Nevertheless, Mailer's statement—that "writing books is the closest men ever come to childbearing"—reveals the realization that the two are not equal and suggests a hierarchy of accomplishments in which childbearing ranks higher than writing books; male writers know that, while they are striving for the same achievement through their writing, they will never quite be able to reach the

experience of giving birth. Again, Homans' discussion about the use of figurative language representing a striving to reproduce the literal is relevant here.

Returning to Brooke, however, Rich's theory does not quite fit. After all, Brooke allows (albeit in a limited sense) writing, but he forbids pregnancy—the opposite of the pattern that Rich theorizes. Nevertheless, an envy of Morag's ability to create—both aesthetically and biologically—is at the root of his behaviour. Because of his status as a professor of English, and therefore a literary critic, he is in a stronger position to criticize and demean her writing than he would be to criticize and demean her ability to create a child; he can maintain a position of authority and superiority (he believes) in the artistic realm, whereas he could not do so as easily or as appropriately in the realm of motherhood. Also, it is possible—given the old adage that "those who can do, and those who can't teach"—that Brooke is a failed artist himself; therefore, his envy of Morag's talent as a writer is more intense, and the desire to oppress her in that role is stronger.

In the Introduction to her book *A Question of Balance: Artists and Writers on Motherhood*, Judith Pierce Rosenberg brings up another interesting theory that is relevant at this point. She explains that a common way of thinking about creating art versus creating a child, and at the same time denying women artistic creativity, has been that "[t]he male artist creates books or sculptures because he cannot bear a child; a woman's creative drive is fulfilled by motherhood" (1). Therefore, the "creative drive," and the direction which that drive takes, is seen to hinge on one's reproductive capacity: those who can not bear children (i.e. men) become artists to fulfill that same need to create that is satisfied by bearing children. Consequently, by

that logic, women should be satisfied creatively by their biological role and should not feel the need to become artists. This type of thinking is also often used to explain why many successful female writers of the past—George Eliot, the Brontës, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf, for example—were women who did not (for various reasons) have children: according to this theory, their "creative drive" had not been fulfilled by motherhood, so, consequently, they had to resort to writing to find satisfaction.

Again, in this theory, the capacity of bearing a child is given the superior status. Yet, ironically, this is a way of suppressing women and denying them fulfillment by limiting them to their biological role, a role with which they supposedly should be satisfied. The feminist contentions to this type of thinking are a reaction to the notion that, since men have been denied the experience of carrying a child, it is only fair that women should be denied artistic creation. Suleiman discusses such thinking, locating its origin in psychoanalysis: "It took psychoanalysis to transform moral obligation into a psychological 'law,' equating the creative impulse with the procreative one and decreeing that she who has a child feels no need to write books" (359). Le Guin calls this the "either books-or-babies doctrine" (35), and she asserts that "[t]his refusal to allow both creation and procreation to women is cruelly wasteful: not only has it impoverished our literature by banning the housewives, but it has caused unbearable pain and self-mutilation" (36). Thus, the notion that artistry and motherhood arise out of the same basic need—thereby shutting mothers out of the artistic realm and denying the experience of motherhood to artists—is what the feminist critics, like Jong and Le Guin, who do not approve of

the equating of motherhood and writing (and the rampant use of the metaphor), are reacting the most strongly against. This attempt to deny women both by suggesting that books and babies are interchangeable is, apparently, what angers Jong and Le Guin the most about the comparison between writing and giving birth: by equating the two, they fear that the two will be seen as interchangeable, each satisfactory on its own.

Indeed, Laurence, herself, recognizes that the notion that those who are mothers should be creatively fulfilled, or conversely that women who are established artists should not be interested in having children, is absurd and ultimately damaging to the female spirit. We can see this in *Dance on the Earth*, where Laurence discusses her mother-in-law, Elsie Fry Laurence, a woman "who wanted to have children and to write" (130): "She bore her children and lived to rejoice greatly in them, and in her grandchildren, and even in her great-grandchildren. . . . But she must have wondered sometimes why it couldn't be possible both to have children and to write books" (129). Like Laurence, Elsie felt a strong compulsion to do both, and Laurence recalls, "[t]hrough our correspondence, and whenever we met, we would talk interminably about the two things that mattered most to both of us, children and writing" (128). Laurence laments the sacrifice of her mother-in-law's need to write, saying, "I wish [her] life had allowed her to write more" (129); however, she also recognizes that having children was an equally strong need: "She was a woman who not only wanted her own children, but needed them" (128).

In fact, a major aspect of *Dance on the Earth* is Laurence's speculation about the artistry that she sees existing in many of the women in her life—her biological

mother, her aunt/stepmother, and her grandmother—that was overshadowed or pushed aside by each one's role as mother, and she considers the effect that this sacrifice most likely had on each one of these women: "All of them were talented artists in their various ways—music, teaching, writing," Laurence writes; "All of them might have, under other circumstances, pursued careers that fulfilled their talents, as well as marrying and having children. I mourn that loss, even as I rejoice in the riches they gave their children" (10). Yes, in her fiction Laurence makes connections between, and even parallels, the roles of artist and mother; but never does she suggest that the two are interchangeable, that one may be replaced by the other.

Morag is a prime example of the separateness and the equal insistence of each drive. Rather than attempting to fulfill her creative drive by having a child (which is the most common and practical route for women who feel, or are told, that they cannot do both), Morag attempts to suppress her need to have a child by focusing on her writing. A type of sublimation—an attempt to channel her need to have a child into an endeavour that is more acceptable to Brooke—is going on here, even though her desire to write is just as strong as her desire to have a child. As both Le Guin and Jong point out, this is not an uncommon attempt among female writers who can not, or believe it impossible to, have children: About childless female writers such as Austen, Eliot, Edith Wharton and Woolf, Jong writes that "[i]n their time the only way for a woman artist to combat the Victorian stereotype of 'the angel in the house' was to turn around and become the devil (or else to assert that they were mothers of books, and thus *had* fulfilled the ideal of womanhood, albeit in another way" (29);

and Le Guin reveals her reluctance to criticize the either-books-or-babies doctrine by writing, "Still I have to grit my teeth to criticize [it], because it has given real, true comfort to women who could not or chose not to marry and have children, and saw themselves as 'having' books instead. But though the comfort may be real, I think the doctrine false" (35).

Morag's story demonstrates the falseness of the doctrine, as her attempt to quell her desire to have a child by burying herself in her writing is futile. Despite the fact that Morag almost obsessively works on her novel all day long while Brooke is at work, she cannot forget her desire to have a child. Moreover, this sublimation, and the fact that Brooke himself encourages it as sublimation, is not only futile, but it also removes the attribution of desire (or, indeed, satisfaction) from the act of writing itself: since Brooke sees it as only a diversion from Morag's "real" desire to have a child, he is even less likely to consider it a serious pursuit or need on its own.

As testament to the fact that both needs are separate, Morag, although she has just finished her first novel and has had it accepted for publication, becomes increasingly alienated from herself: "The feeling of being separated from herself increases" (284), we are told. This, of course, is a natural and expected feeling from one who has been denied at least one of the two roles (and effectively both of the two roles) that are her "centre." Moreover, as she continues to deny herself, or more accurately is denied, a child, her writing suffers. Thus, while the two are not interchangeable needs, they do affect each other; therefore, while Laurence has isolated each as a separate need, seemingly collapsing the metaphor comparing writing with motherhood, she again brings them together by depicting the

ramifications of dissatisfaction in one role upon the other. Morag realizes that if she is missing this essential core of herself—Morag as mother—that she will be empty inside, and therefore unable to write: "How can she write if she goes blind inside?" (284), she wonders. This is an early indication of a theme which we will see develop in the rest of the novel, that Morag's inspiration for her writing is tied up with her role as mother, even though the two are separate needs. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence speaks of "the need to create in a society that questions this need or ignores it, the results [of which] are self-inflicted wounds scarring the heart" (159); apparently, she feels the same way about the need to create a child, which, when denied, scars the heart, wounds the spirit, and ultimately destroys inspiration.

Soon after this, however, Morag wrests the control of both her writing and her reproductive capacity from Brooke. Both are actions that she actively undertakes essentially on her own, by her own will, and both are acts of empowerment for her. This liberation from Brooke's influence is the lead up to "Rites of Passage," the section of the novel in which Morag reaches maturity as an artist and a mother.

She begins by taking control of her writing. Despite Brooke's patronizing attitude toward her writing, Morag spends a great deal of time working on, and invests a great deal of seriousness and devotion in, her novel. "Days, Morag writes" (265), always making sure to resume her housewife/child role by the time Brooke gets home from work: "Morag usually stops writing about four, so she will have time to get outside the novel before Brooke arrives home" (248). Morag is secretly building an independent existence as a writer, apart from Brooke or his opinions; Brooke's appraisal of her work, and even his recognition of her as a serious writer,

are growing increasingly unnecessary to her. From the beginning, Brooke sits in judgment over her writing: "Why don't you let me be the judge of that? (241), he tells her when Morag criticizes her own writing. His subsequent judgment is a condescending one: "I think these are *quite* good . . . They certainly need a little polishing, and I'm not sure of the plausibility of either ending, to tell you the truth, but—yes, they're definitely worth working on, I'd say" (242). In the early stages of the marriage, Morag's reaction to his patronizing critique of her work is one of self-criticism: "She is hungry for approval, but suddenly she can not take what he is saying. . . . Brooke, she says in a hard voice, they aren't any good. They're trivial and superficial" (242). The next time such an encounter occurs, when Morag has reluctantly handed over her beloved first novel *Spear of Innocence* to Brooke, there are indications of her decreasing reliance on his opinion. However, her rebellion against his critique of her work only takes place in her mind:

> Finally she shows *Spear of Innocence* to Brooke. Reluctantly. He stays up until nearly midnight, reading it.
>
> "Well," he says at last, carefully, "it seems to me that the novel suffers from having a protagonist who is nonverbal, that is, she talks a lot, but she can't communicate very well."
>
> "I know that. I know. That was part of the problem."
>
> "I also wonder," Brooke says, flicking pages, "if the main character—Lilac—expresses anything which we haven't known before?"
>
> No. She doesn't. But *she* says it. That is what is different.
>
> "I see what you mean," Morag says. "I'll think about it." (266)

Although she submits to Brooke vocally, with her outer voice, Morag's inner voice and her actions demonstrate her growing strength as a writer. Right after the above exchange, Morag, without implementing any of Brooke's suggested changes, sends her novel away: "The next day she parcels up the mass of paper and sends it, submits it, to a publisher. She does not tell Brooke" (266). In this case, "submission" is an act of empowerment; from her experiences with the publishers, Morag gains the confidence to stand up to Brooke. "Morag realizes, with some surprise, that she is able to defend her own work" (280), and "[o]nly when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with the knowledge that this part of herself is really there" (280). She then goes on to exercise those muscles further, and assert her own authority in the realm of writing, when faced with further patronizing from Brooke: "I know you know a lot about novels. But I know something, as well. Different from reading or teaching" (281), she tells him.

Thus, it is first as a writer that Morag frees herself from Brooke. It is at this same time, during which Morag is gaining a strong sense of herself as a capable writer, that she also demands that Brooke stop treating her like a child: "I am not your child. I am your wife" (243), she has told him earlier, and she is growing increasingly resentful of such treatment. Due to her success with the publication of her novel, she realizes the ridiculousness and the unfairness of being thought of as a child; such treatment is at odds with her maturity as a writer.

Not only does she begin to recognize and resent her childlike status in her marriage, but she also begins to realize that Brooke will never give her her own child: "He cannot ever say to her, finally, once and for all, that he cannot bear for her to bear a child. He will never say that. But he cannot agree to a child, either" (265-6). It is now clear to her that, rather than needing "to have Brooke's children . . . [being] necessary in the deepest part of her being" (219), her need to have her own child is what is necessary for her: "she wants children all the same. Why? Something too primitive to be analyzed? Something which needs to proclaim itself, against all odds? Or only the selfishness of wanting someone born of your flesh, someone related to you?" (266). She wants to give birth to something that is a part of herself, not necessarily, as she first believed, a part of Brooke. In fact, she at this point begins to wonder if she even wants to have a child that is Brooke's also: "She wonders whether, if Brooke now suggested she should try to have his child, she would any longer agree" (279).

Thus, like her writing, having a child is an act that Morag must undertake on her own, without Brooke's help or his approval. She does so through her sexual encounter(s) with Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre when she deliberately does not use birth control: Jules asks her (in contrast to Brooke's characteristic command), "[Y]ou don't want to get pregnant, do you?" (301), and she replies, "Would you mind very much if I didn't do anything to try not to" (301). Ironically, because Morag's choice to have a child has so long been denied to her, Jules responds by asking rhetorically: "Do you have to ask my permission?" (301). Morag's lovemaking with Jules, in addition to being sexually and emotionally satisfying—and in addition to resulting in a much-

desired pregnancy—is an act of empowerment from the outset: "this joining is being done for other reasons, some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from herself" (292). As Jules puts it, "Magic. You were doing magic, to get away" (294), to free herself from the influence and control of Brooke, who was her only previous lover. The pregnancy that is the result of this union with Jules further solidifies her break from Brooke:

> Would she have gone back if she hadn't been pregnant? At this moment, she feels she would have. Was it only for that reason, after all, she had wanted to get pregnant, so her leaving of Brooke would be irrevocable? So she would not be able to change her mind? And had chosen Jules only so there wouldn't be the slightest chance of pretending the child was Brooke's? (317)

Morag's writing and her motherhood are again woven together. By gaining confidence because of her initial success with her writing, Morag gains the courage to leave Brooke and pursue having a child on her own; by becoming pregnant with another man's child, Morag makes a return to Brooke impossible and thereby frees herself to write. "I know that whatever I'm going to do next, or wherever I go, it'll have to be on my own" (294), Morag asserts.

This new independence of Morag's—choosing to become a single mother and to rely on her writing as a career—suggests another basis of comparison for Morag's role as mother and Morag's role as writer. It is significant that single-motherhood and a career in writing are both seen as unconventional and difficult, and even dubious, undertakings. And not only are they comparable in this way, but they also, in Morag's case, affect each other, since she is responsible for both nurturing and

providing for her child: being solely responsible for a child with no help will hinder her writing, while not being a productive (and profitable) writer will make her unable to support her child. When she first realizes that she may really be pregnant, she panics: "How could she have been so unbalanced as actually to try to be? How would she earn a living? She hadn't thought of that at the time, but does so now. Fear. Panic" (303). And later, she questions her sanity for undertaking such a thing on her own: "Why had she imagined that she could look after and support a kid, on her own? It had seemed a perfectly natural notion at the time. Now it seems merely lunacy" (317). This type of uncertainty is comparable to the uncertainty one encounters when faced with the task of writing; although the desire to become a writer or the desire to have children comes definitely, the specifics are often vague. For example, when Royland asks her about her writing, Morag responds, "[A]bout the thing I seem to want to do, or have to. It seems like an awfully dubious idea, in a lot of ways, but I guess I'll have to go on with it. Maybe it's begun. I don't known very much about it yet" (110). Taken out of context, this could sound very much like Morag's thoughts about her pregnancy. King recognizes the connection between motherhood and writing on this basis in Laurence's own life: Laurence, he writes, "had a[n] . . . ability to know what was right for her. For her, the birth of books and the birth of babies were the central events in her life, even though she was well aware of the binds to which she might be subjected" (110-1). He quotes a letter written by Laurence to Adele Wiseman in which she expresses her sense of what Di Brandt calls the shocking "discrepancy between people's momentary desire for children and the reality it entails" (42): "I suppose having a novel is similar to having a baby—when

you're carrying it you think everything is going to be wonderful as soon as it's born, only to find that you enter then a new phase of existence that carries with it its own special problems" (King 111).

However, there is a fundamental difference between undertaking the suspect act of making a career of writing and making the dubious choice to become a single mother: While choosing to become a writer is for the most part a choice of (potential) individual hardship, choosing to become a single mother is a double hardship, for both mother and child. The hardship becomes even more intense when a child of mixed race (like Pique) is involved. This makes Morag question her own motives and selfishness for having a child: "I chose to have her, in the first place, and maybe I should have seen it would be too difficult for her. You don't think of that at the time, or I didn't, anyway" (111). Even before her pregnancy, when she was only longing for children, she questioned her need: "she wants children all the same. Why? Something too primitive to be analyzed? Something which needs to proclaim itself, against all odds? Or only the selfishness of wanting someone born of your flesh, someone related to you?" (266). She at one point even thinks of getting pregnant with Pique as a betrayal: "How many people had she betrayed? Has she even betrayed the child itself? This thought paralyzes her" (317).

Nevertheless, the title of the section in which Morag is faced with the emotional and practical challenges of being a single mother and being a professional writer—"Rites of Passage"—indicates that these challenges, along with the doubts and the uncertainty, are healthy and necessary. As Bordner writes, " 'Rites of

Passage' . . . suggests that Morag is undergoing the experiences that will lead to adulthood and maturity as an artist" (159).

When Morag becomes pregnant and no longer has the financial support of a husband, her writing is transformed into something that must bring in an income to provide for her soon-to-be-born child. She turns away from fiction and channels her ability to write into more immediately profitable ventures: "Morag embarks on frenzied attempts to write and sell articles, any kind of articles, to the local press. . . . During the months when she is wrestling with these articles, she writes no fiction, nothing involving. Nothing" (321). This, of course, is a realistic depiction of a pregnant woman who must write enough to earn an income, but who, quite naturally, "feels too tired and lousy most evenings to do any writing at all" (316), and, therefore, must put aside her creative writing for a time, as she is exhausted and unable to summon the concentration, dedication, and emotional and mental strength that a work of fiction demands.

However, as the action of a fictional character, this turning away from the writing of fiction also has symbolic import in *The Diviners*. Again, writing is paralleled with motherhood. In order to make this parallel, we must go back and look at Morag's experience with writing her first novel. In addition to being a *künstlerroman*, portraying the developing sensibilities of an artist-figure, *The Diviners* is also highly metafictional; that is, it is a "fiction about fiction" (Baldick 133), in that it "openly comments on its own fictional status" (133)—particularly through the frame narrative, which suggests that the novel that Morag is writing is, in fact, *The Diviners*, the novel that we are reading. However, *The Diviners* is also

metafictional in that it comments on the process, the techniques, and the overall experience of writing fiction.

We are given access to Morag's experience with writing her novel, and we can see how her characters and plot inhabit her mind: "Morag begins writing the novel almost unexpectedly, although Lilac has been in her mind for some time. She has no idea where the character has come from" (244), we are told, and Morag reveals that "[t]hey'd been real to her, the people in the books. Breathing inside her head" (67). This sense of her characters as real people, as well as her emotional attachment to these characters, has been with Morag since childhood, when she created for herself a "spruce-house family, all of whom [she] knew as totally individuated persons" (20). And it stays with Morag throughout her writing career: the early stages of the writing of one of her later novels is described in terms of fetal imagery, as "the novel . . . taking shape in her head" (385), and the character in this novel "inhabits Morag's head and talks in his own voice" (390). As with Dickens, Morag's characters are the "children of her fancy," occupying a space in her mind and affections as a child inhabits first its mother's womb and then her heart. Laurence herself reveals a similar sense of the way her characters take on a life of their own inside her mind when she describes the inception of *The Stone Angel* in *Dance on the Earth*: "An old woman had come into my mind. I suppose she had been there for a while, but all at once she became insistent" (155).

The inhabitation of a writer's mind by "living," "breathing," "real" characters makes a comparison with pregnancy—the inhabitation of a woman's womb with a living, breathing child—feasible. Joyce's description of his book as "the child which

[he] has carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination" (202) then becomes an appropriate metaphor--despite the inappropriate use of the metaphor by a male writer. It also explains why a pregnant woman, already filled up with a child, would need to turn away from fiction, an equally consuming experience, for awhile. This is emphasized by the fact that Morag returns to writing fiction shortly after Pique is born.

Jong, however, reacts against the use of the metaphor in this way by both male and female writers, and her reaction against it is also a metafictional argument, based on her sense that such a comparison makes writing seem easy and passive:

> Although the *idea* for a poem or novel often comes as if unbidden, a gift from the Muse (or the communal unconscious), and although at rare, blessed moments, one may write *as if* automatically, as if in the grip of an angel who seems to push one's pen across the page, still, most often, literary creativity is sheer hard labour, quite different from the growing of a baby in the womb, which goes on despite one's conscious will and is, properly speaking, God's miracle, or nature's, and does not belong to the individual woman who provides it with a place to happen. (27)

She adds, "How much more passive pregnancy is than creativity! Creativity demands conscious, active will; pregnancy only demands the absence of ill-will. Perhaps the desire to equate them arises from the artist's ancient wish that creativity be as effortless, easy and unconscious as the creation of a fetus" (27). Jong is attempting to remove the mystery from writing; Laurence, however, although she knows first-hand of the hard work involved in writing, also believes in the miracle of the

accomplishment—a miracle akin to the miracle of giving birth: the labour of writing and the labour of mothering are viewed by her as blessings in themselves. In her letter to Atwood, she writes that children are "very like the writing. A gift, given to you by life, undeserved like all grace is undeserved by its very nature" (4). Thus, while Jong would like to designate pregnancy as a primarily physical, passive experience and writing as a purely intellectual, active experience, thereby negating any basis for comparison between the two, Laurence suggests that there is a realm in which the two meet: Both are miraculous gifts given by God, His way of working His miracles through humans. Moreover, because it is a gift from God, writing, like becoming pregnant, is something that one cannot force: Laurence reveals in *Dance on the Earth* that many of her books felt like gifts given to her, and she stresses, "I've never been able to force a novel. I have always had the sense of something being given to me. You can't sit around and wait until inspiration strikes, but neither can you force into being something that isn't there" (199).

Both Morag's and Laurence's sense of being "filled up" by their plots and their characters—believing them to be real, hearing their voices, and essentially taking dictation from them—sometimes seems more comparable to schizophrenia or even possession than to pregnancy. However, this can also apply to motherhood. Although we can see this somewhat in Morag, the best example of this is found in Stacey (Cameron) MacAindra, the heroine of Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*. Worry about her children and about her own ability to mother constantly nags at Stacey: In this sense, Stacey, as a mother, demonstrates the same "half-lunatic sense of

possession, of being possessed by the thing" (*The Diviners* 280) that Morag does with her writing.

Another similarity between pregnancy and writing a book may be found in *Dance on the Earth*. Laurence there includes a letter she wrote to Adele Wiseman in the late stages of her first pregnancy. In this letter, she relates her frustration because her baby is overdue: "The whole problem with me is that the wretched baby hasn't arrived yet, although nearly a week overdue. I know this isn't unusual with first babies, but it is rather maddening all the same. . . . I can't seem to focus my mind on anything much except wondering when this kid is going to arrive" (137). This frustration is analogous to a writer's frustration and preoccupation with an unfinished piece of writing, or to the anxious and suspenseful wait for a response from the publishers to which one has submitted one's work: "Morag has not heard yet from the publishers. The waiting is intolerable" (275). Laurence's condition in the late stages of her pregnancy, particularly the inability to focus the mind on anything else, also argues against Jong's suggestion that pregnancy is a purely physical, and not an intellectual (or conscious), experience: The frustration of waiting for her child's arrival occupies Laurence's consciousness and makes any other intellectual focus difficult.

Another example of how pregnancy can be an intellectual experience, and also one comparable to the experience of a writer, is the issue of one's amazement at one's own capacity to create. This is an undeniable aspect of both the female experience of her own sexuality (from puberty to holding a child in her arms) and the developing artist's experience. Also, it again relates to Laurence's conception of both

writing and motherhood as being gifts or graces. Laurence describes her first thrill as a result of creation, and publication, in *Dance on the Earth*: "One day a poem of mine appeared. Astonishment. Wonder. Ecstasy" (96). And she asserts that a writer's amazement with the whole process of writing and publication is "one thrill that never diminishes. After the long period of struggling to write a book, and rewrite and revise it, after the editorial consultations and the horrible task of proofreading, finally one holds the finished book in one's hands" (196). This amazement at the capacity to create—seeing the finished product, but even being given the "gift" of the laborious process of creation itself—is perhaps even more intense for the female writer, who has been silenced and discouraged—and essentially told that she does not have the capacity to create a work of art—for so long, and who then begins to believe that she will never create. For example, Morag is plagued with self-doubt and self-criticism in regard to her writing: "Oh how could anybody write anything that good" (92), she laments as a child after being read a poem, and later her disbelief that she will ever write anything great is revealed in the statement "she wants to write a masterpiece and doesn't believe she will ever write anything which will even see the light of day" (202). At this same time, she also questions her capacity to have a child: "she wants her own child and doesn't believe she will ever have one" (202). Even when she is possibly pregnant, she still feels that "[i]t seems unbelievable" (314).

Similar amazed reactions to one's ability to create a child are found in *A Jest of God* and *The Stone Angel*. Mrs. Steiner, a minor character in *The Stone Angel*, expresses such amazement at the entire process: "You get your first period, and you're amazed—*I can have babies now—such a thing*! When the children come, you

think—*Is it mine? Did it come out of me? Who could believe it?*" (104). Rachel expresses something similar when she says that she "cannot really believe that [she] could have a child, that it would be possible" (111).

This delving into the deepest thoughts of women about their pregnancies is something that is relatively new in literature. As Jong writes:

> I think we have never quite considered the implications of the fact that most of the literature about pregnancy and birth has been written either by men or by women who forswore childbearing in order to do their creative work. Even after women writers began to have children more frequently (in the last two generations) they often resisted writing directly about their experiences for fear of criticism according to patriarchal standards . . . or for fear of seeming sentimental and trivial. Pregnancy and birth were considered minor, foolish, 'female' subjects, and women writers who aspired to the heights of Parnassus often disdained them as their male mentors had taught them to do. (29)

She then raises the question, "What untold wonders would world literature contain if it told the story of pregnancy, childbirth, and childbearing as well as the story of childlessness? What untold stories might we hear if mothers as well as fathers were able to relate their tales?" (30).

Laurence's telling of the "untold story" takes the form of her writing about childbirth realistically and from the female perspective; however, as Jong suggests, there were very few models in this area for women writers. Laurence describes her

commitment to realistic birth scenes in her fiction, as well as her slowness to undertake such a task, in *Dance on the Earth*:

> In my first novel, *This Side Jordan*, published in 1960, I described the birth of Miranda Kestoe's child from the point of view of Johnnie Kestoe, the child's father. How could I have done? How could I have been so stupid, so self-doubting? I find it hard to understand. At that point I had borne two children, but women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's point of view. We had all read many women writers, of course, but I had found no one who described sex or birth as they really were for women. I, who had experienced such joy with sex, such anguish and joy in the birth of my children, not only didn't have the courage to describe these crucial experiences; it didn't even occur to me to do so. (5-6)

"My novels are not exactly dotted with birth scenes," she adds, "but after that I never hesitated to write about birth, and I never did so again except from the viewpoint of the mother" (6).

Given this commitment to portraying birth scenes realistically, Laurence is less likely to parallel writing and giving birth at this point; the metaphor (which tends towards the romantic) is at odds with the realism that she feels is necessary here. Certainly, the way Pique's birth is described—"[t]he child rips its way into its life, tearing its mother's flesh in its hurry, unwilling to wait" (326)—leaves little room for comparison with writing, a much less physically violent task. Nevertheless, Laurence, in the more metafictional sections of the novel, does parallel some of the feelings, if not the mechanics, of giving birth and writing/completing a novel.

For example, the way that words flow out of Morag unbidden, forcing their way out of her mind and onto paper with little conscious effort on her part, is similar to the birth of a child. Laurence herself claimed that she experienced this in her writing. In *Dance on the Earth* she describes the writing of *This Side Jordan*: "I scribbled on and on, as though a voice were telling me what to write down. It was the easiest novel I ever wrote because I knew absolutely nothing about writing a novel. The pages poured out" (152). Similarly, she describes writing *The Stone Angel* as "a wonderful release" (156).

However, this sense of release is also, necessarily, followed by a sense of emptiness when the whole novel, which has been so much a part of the writer, has been expelled from one's mind—an emptiness that is comparable to post-natal depression. Morag's experience, as a writer, with such sudden emptiness is described: "Days, Morag writes. Then comes the day when, astonishingly, the novel is completed. It has taken over three years, and much rewriting. She feels emptied, deprived of Lilac's company" (265). Her experiences with later novels is similar, always feeling "a massive relief at having it done, and at the same time the emptiness that always follows the ending of a book" (443). An anecdote in *Dance on the Earth* suggests a comparison between the emptiness of completing a novel and the emptiness of giving birth: Laurence describes giving birth to her son David in Africa and how the midwife "placed him on [her] belly to make up for all the weight that was no longer inside [her] and to alleviate any cramps from this abrupt change" (148).

Usually this is the point—the point of giving birth—at which the males would end the metaphor comparing writing with having a child. Laurence, however, in her act of reappropriation, extends the metaphor comparing motherhood and writing beyond the point of giving birth; she considers the lasting relationship between a writer and her work and a mother and her child. As Rich asserts, "To 'mother' a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years" (12). This ongoing, intense relationship can also apply to a writer and her work, even beyond the point of publication. For, although Morag admits to Dan McRaith that she "[n]ever" (401) reads her own books "once they're published" (401), her relationship with those books, her "mothering" of them, never really ceases.

One aspect of the continuing relation between a parent and child that the male writers do address in their use of the metaphor is their eternal pride in their creations, as is demonstrated in Jonson's poem to his son and Dickens's fondness for *David Copperfield*. This pride in one's creation and the belief in its perfection is, indeed, something that Morag and Laurence experience in regard to their children. Morag, looking at a sleeping Pique, thinks she "is as near perfection as it would be possible to get" (333). Similarly, Laurence, in *Dance on the Earth*, speaks of her own "mother's idealization of her perfect child" (40), and she, herself, later demonstrates a similar idealization about her own children: "I never thought I'd be such a doting mother, but quite honestly, she is such a lovely child" (138), she writes to Adele Wiseman about her daughter Jocelyn.

This "unconditional love" (*Dance on the Earth* 16), however, is not a feeling which female writers tend to permit themselves in regard to their writing; in fact, women are much more critical (and, subsequently, self-critical) when it comes to their aesthetic creations. "I don't think it's good enough" (135) is Morag's attitude in regard to much of her writing. Moreover, this critical attitude toward her writing continues even after publication, when it has been edited and ultimately accepted by other eyes; Laurence suggests that women writers are less likely than men to conceive of their creations as fully-formed. For example, Morag, when her employer Mr. Sampson enthusiastically displays her collection of short stories *Presences* in his bookstore, "decide[s] she hate[s] the title" (384), even though Sampson thinks it "unprofessional to think of such things after the book [is] out" (384).

This relates to a fear of sending a book that is half-formed out into the world, for appraisal by other eyes. In the Preface to *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence's daughter Jocelyn describes her mother's aim for perfection in her writing: "She was . . . professional enough not to want to hand anything to a publisher that was less than her best" (xiii). Morag also fears the "incompleteness" of her books, even though she does not quite know what would make them complete: "Morag, unsatisfied with *Prospero's Child*, but not knowing what more to do with it, submits it" (354). Morag also demonstrates such anxiety in regard to the future of her daughter Pique, to whom she is afraid that she has passed on all of her negative traits. Her confidence in Pique's perfection is diminished and replaced by anxiety about her future as Pique grows older. For example, Morag worries that she may have passed on to Pique an inability to sustain a relationship with a man that will make for hardship in the future:

"did I pass *that on*? I mean—what if she can't have any kind of lasting relationship?" (231). Her worry about Pique, who is only eighteen, out on her own is intensified, then, by Morag's sense that she has not sufficiently prepared her daughter to be out in the world and that she has equipped her daughter with only her own flaws.

Despite this anxiety that neither the book nor the child is completely ready to be out in the world, both Morag and Laurence exhibit a strong capacity to adamantly defend either if it becomes necessary. Morag, during the process of publishing her first novel, relishes the opportunity to defend her writing:

> Morag realizes, with some surprise, that she is able to defend her own work. Also, it is a relief to be able to discuss it, no holds barred, with no personal emotional connotations in the argument. Only when the process is completed does she see that it has been like exercising muscles never before used, stiff and painful at first, and then later, filled with the knowledge that this part of herself is really there. (280)

As we have seen, Morag also rises to the challenge of defending her writing against Brooke's criticism. Laurence, herself, was involved in intense (and often personally painful) battles to defend her work: For example, her debates with editors and publishers, her separation from her husband when it was revealed that he did not like *The Stone Angel*, and her painful battles with those who charged *The Diviners* as being blasphemous and wanted to ban the novel from schools. The attack on *The Diviners* was especially painful for Laurence: "It had felt like a gift of grace to me to be able to write it. I was shocked and hurt by this hostility" (214), she reveals. Similarly, despite Morag's own frustration with Pique, she is shocked and hurt when

she finds out that Pique, her "gift of grace," is being taunted at school, and she is subsequently roused to the desire to defend her daughter: "*How to spare one's children at least some kinds of pain?*" (447), she questions.

All of these conflicting emotions surrounding both one's child and one's writing—criticism, unconditional love, frustration, worry, and the desire to defend—must be tremendously draining. Thus, being a mother and being a writer are both roles that, paradoxically, enrich and satisfy but also drain and deplete. As Stacey, a worried mother whose mind is continually nagged with fear about harm coming to her children and about the soundness of her own mothering, says, "[My children] nourish me and yet they devour me, too" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 20). Surely, the same can be said about Morag's and Laurence's successful, yet often difficult, careers as writers.

The conclusion of *The Diviners* leaves us with perhaps the most clear and the most poignant parallels between Morag's role as a mother and her role as a writer. The first is something that Morag must learn to take from her experience with writing and apply to her daughter: the respect for the individual character. In the Foreword to her collection of essays *Heart of a Stranger*, Laurence designates the capacity to think of one's characters as individuals in their own right as a fundamental part of the writer's sensibility: "what we are trying to do is to understand those others who are our fictional characters, somehow to gain entrance to their minds and feelings, to respect them for themselves as human individuals, and to portray them as truly as we can" (12). Claudette Sartiliot, in "The Artist-Figure in the Works of Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy," suggests that Morag "realizes, through her experience

in life, that the role of the artist . . . is to see inside people's heads, to try [to] understand them" (117). However, when it comes to Morag's understanding of her daughter, the opposite seems to be more true; she learns to respect the individuality and the unique experiences of her characters—to listen to their voices—before she is able to do so with her own daughter. When she talks to A-Okay about writing and he says that "[i]t's there you have to make your statement" (67), Morag thinks, "Or not make it. You can't write a novel that way, in any event. They'd been real to her, the people in the books. Breathing inside her head" (67). She must learn that neither can she make a statement through Pique: Pique is Morag's creation, but she is also her own person with her own story to tell. Similarly, just as Morag resists the tendency to interpret her characters through her own experiences and feelings, she must also resist that urge with Pique. "Am I only interpreting her through my own experience?" Morag asks herself, and she chastises herself for doing so: "[I] must not do that. No parallels. Dangerous" (258).

Morag also, at the conclusion of the novel, learns something about both the writing and Pique simultaneously: She learns that each one was only a temporary gift and that she must let them both go. It is no accident that Pique's leaving and Morag's writer's block occur at the same time: Laurence has deliberately crafted this simultaneity. Laurence's letter to Atwood emphasizes that both writing and children are gifts; moreover, they are gifts "undeserved" (4) and "not to be owned" (4). It is only through Royland that Morag completely realizes the implications of being blessed as she has been with her talent for writing and with her child: Along with the blessing comes the fact that one must relinquish those blessings, no matter how

painful, when the time comes. This is a theme throughout the novel: Christie loses his ability to tell stories; Jules loses his singing voice; and Royland loses his ability to divine water.

Again emphasizing the parallels between the cycle of a woman's reproductive life and the development of the artist, the loss of Morag's ability to write may be viewed as a type of "menopause" of the writer. *The Stone Angel*'s Mrs. Steiner expresses the surprise and sorrow that a woman experiences when she realizes that she can no longer have children, feelings that are similar to Morag's feelings about the loss of her writing: "When you can't have them any more, what a shock—*It's finished—so soon*?" (104). In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence expresses the pain of her own recognition, after writing *The Diviners*, that her gift of writing novels had been lost: "I have tried over the past years to write another novel. In fact, I have tried many times. I have not succeeded. It has finally become clear to me that the novel I thought I wanted to write was simply not there to be written. I prophesied this at the end of *The Diviners*, but I didn't know how much it would hurt" (6-7).

At the conclusion of *A Jest of God*, Rachel has not yet realized the role of mother in the same way Morag has. Yet she experiences a sense of motherhood in her brush with pregnancy, and many of her experiences in this regard correspond with Morag's sense of loss that she experiences as a writer. When Rachel finds out that she is not pregnant as she believed she was, she experiences a profound sense of loss and speaks in "the voice of some woman mourning for her children" (187). In addition to almost experiencing real motherhood, Rachel also experiences fleeting motherhood in her role as teacher, and often laments the fact that "there's nothing

lasting. [The children] move on, and that's that. It's such a brief thing" (114). She does not realize, however, that what she is describing is akin to being a mother until some time later, when she not only comes to terms with the necessary loss of her "children," but also realizes the universality of this inevitable loss: "It may be that my children will always be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's" (209).

By the end of *The Diviners*, Morag must also accept that Pique, like her writing, is "temporary" and "never to be held." Again emphasizing the parallels between Morag as a writer and Morag as a mother, her writer's block and the departure of Pique occur at the same time. Pique is like the "young swallows fidgeting and flittering in the nest, wanting to fly" (255) that Morag watches daily. And, like the swallow mother, Morag learns to release Pique and let her fly: "Let her go. This time, it had to be possible and was" (464). As Barbara Godard, in "Caliban's Revolt" writes, "The mother releases her daughter as the author lets her characters go, free to develop her different voice" (224), and "[t]his is what it means to (m)other . . .: to enter into a loving and reciprocal relationship with the other, to let the daughter tell her own story" (225).

This notion of letting the daughter tell her own story also suggests another way in which motherhood and artistry are tied together in *The Diviners*. Along with feeling the loss of both her child and her ability to write, Morag is watching Pique, her creation and her child, grow into both an artist in her own right (a songwriter) and a woman capable of having her own children. "Pique, harbinger of my death, continuer of life" (312), Morag thinks, simultaneously rejoicing in her daughter's blossoming and lamenting her own depletion. This is what Lorna Irvine terms "a

psychological journey," an ambivalence that emerges between mother and daughter and creates great tension: "As the daughter grows stronger, the mother weakens; the power seems to have been stolen and the victorious daughter can despair of her own victory" (243).

Returning to *A Jest of God*—a novel which involves fluid definitions of motherhood and shifting configurations of the mother-daughter relationship—we can see this "psychological journey" dramatized. In her relationship with her aging mother, Rachel is increasingly becoming the nurturer rather than the nurtured, the "mother" where before she was the daughter: "I am the mother now" (203), she realizes, and comes to think of her own mother as her "elderly child" (208). Laurence's own relationship with her biological mother Verna, who died very young, is characterized by a similar repositioning of the mother and daughter figures in Laurence's imagination: "I am so much older now than she ever became. Sometimes I think of her as my long-lost child" (7).

The relationship of Morag and Pique is undergoing a similar reconfiguration—the daughter is, in a sense, taking on the role of "mother." This is especially true in terms of each woman as an artist. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that "Morag always felt she was about to learn something of great significance from [Royland], something which would explain everything" (12). What she learns from Royland, when he loses his ability to divine water and when he suggests that A-Okay may have the gift, is that the gift is not lost; it is taken away from the one who possesses it and given to somebody else: "The inheritors. Was this, finally and at last, what Morag had always sensed she had to learn from the old man?

She had known it all along, but not really known. The gift, or portion of grace, or whatever it was, was finally withdrawn, to be given to someone else" (477). Pique is Morag's creation, her "song," but she is also a creator in her own right with her own song to sing, and Morag comes to realize this toward the conclusion of the novel: "Morag had listened to Pique singing many times before, but never before her own song" (464). Thus, with Morag's daughter being the inheritor of her skill with words (along with Jules's musical talent), writing and motherhood are again tied together.

Laurence uses this idea of artistry being passed down to the next generation through the female line as a major theme of *Dance on the Earth*. She divides the memoir into chapters devoted to each of her "mothers"—biological mother, stepmother, and mother-in-law—and concludes the discussion of each woman with the image of the "dance"—a metaphor for artistry of various kinds—being continued by Laurence herself. For example, she considers what was passed on to her by her birth mother: "I mourn that young mother of mine still, and always will. Yet she passed on marvels to me. Humour. Music, although my music has been made with words. She danced on the earth, in her way, in the time that was given to her. Danced laughter, danced youth, danced love, danced hope in a child. She passed her dance on to me" (42). The memoir concludes with Laurence's confidence that her own dance will be continued after she herself is unable to sustain it: "I know now, as I did not know when I wrote the first draft of these memoirs, that my own dance of life has not much longer to last. It will continue in my children, and perhaps for a while in my books. It has been varied, sometimes anguished, always interesting. I rejoice in having been given it. . . . May the dance go on" (222).

A major task of the novel is the blurring of the line between fact and fiction, life and art. As Bordner writes, "It becomes evident early in the novel that there is no clear separation between fact and fiction, that they are so interwoven that they cannot be separated" (148). Indeed, the novel makes this explicit many times, mostly through Morag's frequent contemplation about the relation between the two. For example, she considers the issue of "fiction [being] more true than fact. Or that fact [is] in fact fiction" (33) and she wonders, "Does fiction prophesy life?" (332).

With such a collapse of the distinction between fact and fiction, and life and art, it follows that Morag's declaration "Lucky me. I've got my work to take my mind off my life" (12) is to be challenged. An important way in which art and life converge in the novel is through the comparison of Morag's "work" (her writing, which is her contribution to the realm of art) and her "life" (in this instance, her role as a mother to Pique, her contribution to the realm of life). While Laurence is careful never to make a direct comparison between Morag's role as mother and her role as writer, a careful consideration of the novel reveals that these two roles do indeed play off of each other, intertwine, and run parallel to each other throughout *The Diviners*. The poignancy and power of Laurence's use of these techniques, which demonstrate how Morag's experiences as a mother are enriched and illuminated by her experiences as a writer and vice versa, demonstrate the appropriateness of the use of this metaphor by and for a female writer. Laurence has painted a portrait of the artist with strokes of motherhood, demonstrating that a female artist's experience of her artistry is as unique as her experience of her sexuality, thereby creating a new and powerful conception of the artist.

CHAPTER II: "THE KIDS AND THE WORK, THE WORK AND THE KIDS": THE COMPETING PRIORITIES OF MOTHERHOOD AND WRITING IN *DANCE ON THE EARTH*

"I rank it as a kind of spiritual autobiography" (208), Margaret Laurence says of *The Diviners* in her memoir *Dance on the Earth.* By this, she means that, while Morag Gunn is *not* Margaret Laurence, Laurence strongly identifies with aspects of Morag's life and personality, and she feels an affinity with the character. However, even though Morag's and Laurence's experiences are similar, the way in which the experience of each "protagonist" is depicted in each work differs. *The Diviners* is a work of fiction, a "spiritual autobiography" (208) that strives to blur the distinction between fact and fiction and to suggest that even our own individual histories are also our fictions. *Dance on the Earth*, on the other hand, is ostensibly more concerned with the facts of Laurence's life, despite her recognition made explicit in *The Diviners* that "everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it" (70). Thus, in *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence attempts to depict her own experience less figuratively than she depicts the experience of Morag in *The Diviners*: While *The Diviners* readily accommodates metaphor, *Dance on the Earth* professes to be more concerned with realism.

One of the most obvious similarities between Morag and Laurence, her creator, is that they are both mothers and writers. As Patricia Morley states in "Engel, Wiseman, Laurence: Women Writers, Women's Lives," "Morag's centre is her writing and her child" (162), and Laurence asserts the same about herself. The management of such a dual existence becomes, then, an aspect of the *künstlerroman* that is part of both works: how Morag and Laurence deal with the problems of being

both mothers and writers is a significant aspect of their development as artists. However, while motherhood and writing are effectively and poignantly paralleled in the work of fiction, the memoir strives to de-romanticize the metaphor comparing writing with having a child. This principle also operates in *The Diviners* to some extent, as Laurence simultaneously parallels Morag's writing and her mothering and reveals the conflicts between the two roles. De-romanticization of the metaphor is another method of reappropriating the metaphor from the clutches of male writers: In *Dance on the Earth* and, to some extent, in *The Diviners*, Laurence demonstrates that the things that make writing and motherhood comparable are also the things that make them conflictual, thereby revealing the struggle with which many female writers are faced.

Both *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* involve a protagonist who is both a mother and a writer and the desire to demonstrate what such a life is like. The social expectations that have hindered women of the time in which Laurence is writing (and of which she writes) and earlier times from becoming both mothers and writers—the moral and ethical issues that are raised against women who want to do both—have been discussed in the previous chapter. Even after a woman has overcome the social censure, however, she must deal with the subsequent material conditions, the practicalities of being both a mother and a writer. As Ursula K. Le Guin, in "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book," writes:

> There is less censure now, and more support, for a woman who wants both to bring up a family and work as an artist. But it's a small degree of improvement. The difficulty of trying to be responsible, hour after hour, day

> after day, for maybe 20 *years*, for the well-being of children and the excellence of books, is immense: it involves an endless expense of energy and an impossible weighing of competing priorities. (35)

The injustice of having to choose between motherhood and a profession (in this case, writing), which deeply saddened Laurence, has been discussed in the previous chapter; this chapter will focus on the difficulties of doing both, even though both are desired and necessary roles for most of the women who occupy them.

In her well-known essay *A Room of One's Own*, writer Virginia Woolf designates the two things that she believes every woman who aspires to be a serious writer requires: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write" (4). The notion of "a room of one's own" has become a symbol—as a "requirement" that is supposedly necessary but at the same time is so difficult to obtain—for women writers, especially those who are also mothers and wives. A contemporary Canadian example of the prevalence of this notion is found in Alice Munro's short story "The Office," in which the protagonist, a wife/mother wishing to write professionally says, "[T]his is what I want an office for . . .: to write in. I was at once aware that it sounded like a finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence. To write, as everyone knows, you need a typewriter, or at least a pencil, some paper, a table and chair; I have all these things in a corner of my bedroom. But now I want an office as well" (60).

Clearly, Munro is thinking of Woolf here, as Woolf's writings on women as writers have constituted sort of a handbook in the twentieth century for women who want to write. Woolf also theorizes that "a woman writing thinks back through her

mothers" (101), something that Laurence does in terms of both her ancestral mothers and her literary foremothers and which she has her protagonist Morag do also. As Coral Ann Howells' essay "In Search of Lost Mothers" discusses, seeking out these lost literary mothers how women "recuperate their literary inheritance" (59) and acquire a sense of the context for themselves as writers. In *The Diviners*, we see Morag looking to her literary foremothers as possible models for how to handle her own writing and motherhood, since the models provided by male writers are not compatible with the circumstances of Morag's life. This search for guidance from female writers of the past is presented dramatically: "While her relationship with the tradition of English literature finds Morag pitting herself against dead fathers, her relationship to literary mothers is a living and vital one, presented in a conversational mode as dialogue" (217), Barbara Godard writes in "Caliban's Revolt: The Discourse of the (M)Other." Laurence also invokes the women writers who preceded her in *Dance on the Earth*, although in less dramatic fashion. Among the possible models put forward in *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth* are Woolf herself, Catharine Parr Trail, and Sylvia Plath.

Laurence refers to Woolf in both *Dance on the Earth* and *The Diviners*. Although Laurence writes in the memoir that "Virginia Woolf is a writer whose perceptions helped shape my view of life, as did her brand of feminism" (129), she ultimately challenges Woolf's model for the female artist in both the memoir and the novel, revealing both the "room of one's own" and the possession of "money" from a source other than the writing to be unrealistic, and ultimately unnecessary, requirements for many women writers.

In *The Diviners*, a young Morag indulges in Woolf-inspired daydreams about being a writer. In these fantasies, she has both a room to herself and evident financial success: "Morag living in her own apartment in the city a small apartment but lovely deep-pile rug (blue) and a beige chesterfield suite the thick-upholstered kind a large radio in a walnut cabinet lots of bookshelves a fireplace that really works" (138). Similarly, Laurence herself admits to youthful dreams of success, presumably as a writer, but also, as she was aware of her widowed stepmother's worries about money, financially: "I had fantasies of becoming rich and famous (in a pinch, rich would do) and saving my mother from anxiety forever" (69). However, the reality of each young woman's future circumstances as a writer is not characterized by such ease and comfort.

A pregnant, and newly-independent, Morag thinks, "A woman, if she is to write, Virginia Woolf once said (or words to that effect), must have a room of her own. The garret bit never appealed to Morag unduly, but by God, it is at least a room of her own" (316). Morag, however, does not have access to this "room of her own" for long: it is lost to her when her daughter Pique is born. This is emphasized by the fact that, immediately after the birth of her daughter, she is sharing literally one room with her newborn daughter. The difficulty of writing within this shared space is clear: "Morag has to write longhand now, at nights so as not to waken the child. She can only type when Pique is awake. The room grows smaller every day" (328).

The loss of the "room of one's own" is also figurative, however, even if one does have a separate room of one's own within the house in which to write. As the protagonist of Munro's "The Office" expresses, trying to do creative work within the

same space in which one must also be a mother (and often a wife) is extremely frustrating:

> A house is all right for a man to work in. He brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work *exists*. He is not expected to answer the telephone, to find things that are lost, to see why the children are crying, or feed the cat. He can shut his door. Imagine . . . a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them. A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offence against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She *is* the house; there is no separation possible. (60)

Morag, in addition to failing to acquire a room of her own, is also a woman without a reserve of financial support to sustain her while she, in turn, sustains her creativity. Her writing, therefore, must necessarily bring in a substantial income. This becomes especially true when she realizes that, not only is she now dependent upon herself financially as a newly-single woman, but she is also pregnant and is soon to have another dependent. This is a great source of anxiety for Morag, who is just now learning independence and gaining confidence in her artistry: "How could she have been so unbalanced as actually to try to be [pregnant]? How would she earn a living? She hadn't thought of that at the time, but does so now. Fear. Panic" (303). But she realizes that it is her responsibility to provide for that child: "she needs a

home for herself and her child, when it is born. . . . If she is to have a home, she must create it" (313), in addition to striving to create art. She subsequently agrees to do housework for her landlady in exchange for "[r]oom and board and a little extra" (315); that section of the novel is titled, appropriately, *Portrait of the Artist as a Pregnant Skivvy*. Morag also laments the fact that she is now becoming "mercenary" (320) in regards to publishing her writing: "If only she weren't so goddamn near being broke" (320).

This combination of the loss of an isolated space in which to write and the need to write in order to make money, rather than having money in order to write, creates a frustrating set of circumstances for the female writer-mother: She needs to bring in money with her writing, but her lack of the ideal circumstances in which to write makes writing difficult. "At nights [Morag] communicates glumly with her chequebook," rather than with the Muse, "in the vain but persistent hope that she has miscalculated the total and may in fact have more money in the bank than she thought" (328). Moreover, this problem of financial concerns distracting one from one's writing is an ongoing one, not easily resolved. An older, more established, Morag expresses it best: "How could anyone be expected to work in such a madhouse, and here she was feeding them all, more or less, and no goddamn money would be coming in if she didn't get back to the typewriter" (13).

Nevertheless, even without the room of her own or financial security, Morag becomes a success as a writer. Through Morag, then, Laurence is challenging Woolf's conception of the artist, revealing it to be one that is not compatible with the circumstances of many women's lives; nor are her requirements necessary for success

as an artist. Woolf appears to accept and encourage the traditional conception of the artist as a solitary, isolated and ultimately heroic figure, devotedly nurturing his or her art and unburdened by the cares of the outside world, emphasized by her insistence on "a room of one's own" in which to write. Le Guin describes such an ideal conception:

> It is a very noble and austere one, with religion at its foundation: it is the idea that the artist must sacrifice himself to his art. . . . His responsibility is to work alone. This heroic stance has been taken as the norm—as natural to the artist—and artists, both men and women, who do not assume it have tended to feel a little shabby and second-rate. (35)

But as Laurence writes in the memoir:

> By the time I was in my late twenties, I began to feel that [Woolf's] writing lacked something I needed. That something was a sense of physical reality. Her characters were beautifully, ironically drawn, but what was lacking was ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling, a few messy kids. Woolf's novels, so immaculate and fastidious in the use of words, are also immaculate and fastidious in ways that most people's lives are not. She says a great deal, but there is a profound way in which she doesn't speak to my own life. (129-30)

Woolf can promote, and believe in, the requirements that she outlines for female writers, because, as Laurence writes, "Woolf always had both" (129).

Morag's story is, indeed, Laurence's "spiritual autobiography," and in *Dance on the Earth*, we can see that Morag's experiences, which challenge Woolf's ideal

portrait of the female writer, are also Laurence's experiences (or, Laurence's experiences as she displays them for us in *Dance on the Earth*).

Laurence, known to write, as Morag does, at the kitchen table, also experienced the frustration of not being able to acquire a "room of one's own" in which to write. Although, as a child, she "needed and did have an unusual amount of privacy in order to think and write" (69), she had to sacrifice this privacy as the mother and wife in a household. Although she was not so literally sharing one room with her children, as Morag does with Pique for a time, she emphasizes that her work-space was effectively her mothering space, and, thus, was symbolically shared.

Financial anxiety was also a reality for Laurence, as it is for Morag. Laurence writes that when she first decided, in her youth, that she wanted to be a writer, she did not see the pursuit as a profitable one: "It never occurred to me that I might be able to earn a living from writing. Just as well, for I never had any unreal expectations of large financial rewards and, in fact, was a professional writer for many years before I could earn a living by the practice of my trade" (74). When she left her husband, taking her children with her, to concentrate on her writing, Laurence had to modify her conception of writing to take into account the possibility of earning an income from it: "I was . . . very much aware that within a year I would have to be self-supporting, although Jack would give me an allowance to help support the kids. I couldn't take a job outside the home, however, because of my children, and in any event, I wasn't qualified to be anything except a typist" (158). About this time, Laurence writes, "I can never be that frightened again" (158). However, as more of her books were published and then published again in paperback versions, Laurence's

financial anxiety decreased somewhat: she had begun to earn money from her writing. Nevertheless, she suffered from financial anxieties for the remainder of her life.

Thus, Woolf, with her insistence on "a room of one's own" and financial security before one can even think of writing, is neither a suitable nor a comforting model for Morag or for Laurence. Le Guin also challenges Virginia Woolf's conception of the female artist: She opens her essay "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book" with this question: "Where does a woman write, what does she look like writing, what is my image, your image, of a woman writing? I asked my friends: 'A woman writing: what do you see?'" (1). One response to Le Guin's question was: "she's sitting at the kitchen table, and the kids are yelling" (1). Le Guin then writes, "And that . . . is the image I shall pursue" (1). Laurence also pursues that image, and, thus, another model is required.

Another literary foremother with whom Laurence and Morag are engaged in dialogue is Catharine Parr Traill. Morag's engagement with this writer is more literally a dialogic one, as she carries on imaginary conversations with the "lady of blessed memory" (109). Catharine Parr Traill, part of what Laurence describes as the "honourable tradition" of Canadian women who managed to write successfully in addition to being wives and mothers, was, as Laurence describes her in *Dance on the Earth*, "writer, wife, and botanist" (136), and, ultimately, a "heroine" (136). She, therefore, seems a suitable and admirable model for Morag and Laurence, since, unlike Woolf, she is burdened with the same financial, mothering, and domestic concerns as Morag and Laurence, yet manages to pull it all off admirably.

Catharine Parr Traill is, indeed, the antithesis to the unsatisfactory model that Virginia Woolf represents: she is neither isolated nor supported by private means, yet she is a successful and prolific writer and a loving mother. Moreover, she is Canadian. Her legacy, however, is not without its strains for her successors: It is her very heroism—her status as a superwoman among Canadian pioneers—that makes her a source of anxiety. Catharine Parr Traill, while an inspiration, both haunts and taunts Morag throughout *The Diviners*, just as Woolf's "a room of one's own" echoes throughout. Catharine Parr Traill inspires—in addition to admiration—feelings of guilt and inadequacy: "I, as you know," Morag imagines her saying, "managed to both write books, with some modest degree of success, while at the same time cultivating my plot of land and rearing my dear children, of whom I bore nine, seven of whom lived" (186). Although the strains of the Parr Traill model are made most visible in *The Diviners*, they are also felt throughout *Dance on the Earth.*

Both Morag's and Laurence's struggles with living up to such a model are well-dramatized in *The Diviners* and *Dance on the Earth.* It is evident that Laurence, as she writes in the memoir, "thought [she] could do everything" (109) like Catharine Parr Traill. Alice Munro, in Wainwright's *A Very Large Soul*, relates her impression of Laurence:

> We talked when I went to her house [in Vancouver]. I remember talking about kids, housework, writing, all those things you talked about as soon as you met another woman who was trying to write. And there was immediate rapport that way because everybody had the same problems. I remember her telling me she ironed all her husband's shirts. And I said, "You mustn't do

> that. You must find some other way." I have the impression of someone who was trying terribly hard to do everything. She was trying to be a good housewife, and mother, and she was trying very hard to write. She was very serious about her writing, but she was also very serious about the whole thing that the culture demanded of us at that time. And so was I. So we became very friendly almost immediately, but not close friends in the sense that we tried to see more of each other a lot, because I think we were both desperate for time. (142)

Dance on the Earth, particularly the section entitled "Margaret," which Laurence says is "about myself as a mother and writer" (8), becomes her exposé of life as a mother and a writer: "[A] woman writer often feels what I believe is termed role conflict. How can you do everything, be everything, at once?" (136), Laurence writes.

In another of Laurence's novels, *The Fire-Dwellers*, a mother's anxiety is effectively depicted. The protagonist Stacey, a mother of four, exhibits a worry about the well-being of her children and a lack of confidence in her own ability to mother that is, in itself, mentally and emotionally exhausting: "They nourish me and yet they devour me, too" (20), Stacey says of her children, and at one point she labels herself a "Kid-ruiner" (29). Also, by the time Stacey has finished caring for, and worrying about, her children and her husband, she has little time left to care for herself or to find a role for herself outside of being a wife to her husband and a mother to her children: "I can't go anywhere as myself," she thinks. "Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother" (90).

Writing is a role that has similar requirements, and effects, as mothering: nurturing and devotion, and an accompanying frustration and anxiety. Therefore, the writer-mother has dual anxiety: Laurence suggests that, like the image of the river that flows both ways that opens and closes *The Diviners*, the writer-mother is a single body containing two separate drives—the drive to mother and the drive to write—and these two drives continually pull against each other. As Le Guin asserts, "A person who undertakes responsibility both to her art and to her dependent children has undertaken a full-time double job that can be simply, practically, destroyingly impossible" (35). Yet, neither is the woman willing, or able, to sacrifice either of these drives. Judith Pierce Rosenberg, in her Introduction to *A Question of Balance: Artists and Writers on Motherhood*, explains:

> With so many demands coming from the outside world, carving out the time and space needed to do creative work requires an inordinate amount of determination. Indeed, while the women interviewed differ in many ways . . ., they seem to have two traits in common: determination and perseverance. Many spoke of motherhood as an experience they were unwilling to deny themselves. But neither were they willing or able to give up their creative work. (2)

Laurence recognizes and acknowledges that, in some ways, mother-writers have an advantage over other working mothers: "Women writers with children are fortunate in some ways. Among women with vocations, women who have felt that sense of dedication and passionate interest in being doctors, lawyers, scholars, or teachers, only writers (and, occasionally, visual artists) can do their work at home"

(136). For example, when Pique falls ill and must stay at home during the day, Morag has the luxury, theoretically, at least, of being able to work at home. Similarly, Laurence was able to enjoy a great deal of time with her own children.

However, as Laurence points out immediately after this, the ability of a writer to work at home is also a drawback for one who is trying to do serious work: "Faced with the daily demands of their own work, the daily needs of their children and their husbands, and the ever-present pressures of a household—the cooking, the shopping, the cleaning, and so on—a woman writer often feels what I believe is termed role conflict" (136). As was already discussed in relation to Woolf, the "room of one's own"—the physical space, as well as the solitude and freedom from interruption that such a space entails—is denied to mothers and wives who work at home. Again, the lack of a "room of one's own" is not only the lack of a literal space to work in; it is also the lack of a realm that is solely devoted to one's writing. Even if a woman is provided with a separate room within the house (or even outside of the house) in which to write, guilt and a sense of obligation, as well as the desire to be with one's family, are mental intrusions that can invade any space.

Interruption, by the needs of children and by the ever-present domestic chores that need to be done to sustain a household, becomes a common feature of the female writer's attempts to write, as both Morag and Laurence well know. And, not only do these interruptions make any sustained concentration impossible, but they also can be highly jarring, due to the disjunction between the realm of fiction and the realm of real life.

Thus, the female writer adopts strategies that help her to move between these two realms, which are essentially two different worlds that she inhabits. For Laurence and for Morag, transition time becomes part of the daily schedule. The process of writing, as Laurence describes and depicts it, is a process of getting inside of the characters' minds, and, indeed, inside of the very novel itself: "getting out of the novel" is a phrase that she uses frequently to describe the return to real life. The tasks of mothering and writing, despite her paralleling of them in *The Diviners*, are not so similar as to be moved between easily: "I learned to write in the morning, when I had a maximum of mental and physical energy. I would stop writing a few hours even before the children arrived home from school, not only to make dinner and do the domestic stuff but also to be mentally and emotionally out of the fictional world and back in the world of my life" (170), Laurence relates. Similarly, Morag, even when she is not yet a mother, "usually stops writing about four, so she will have time to get outside the novel before [her husband] Brooke arrives home" (248).

It is no wonder, then, that the balancing of, and the continual switching between, these two roles seems like, as Laurence puts it, "an impossible juggling act" (157). Of course, the source of this sense of role conflict is the woman's sense, inspired by the likes of Catharine Parr Traill, that she must be everything to everyone: she wants and needs to write, for herself, but she also wants and needs to be a good wife and mother, for herself and for her husband and children. Laurence writes, "My biggest frustration, as usual, was lack of time. When the writing was demanding to be put down on the page, it was difficult to have to leave it in order to make meals, look after the kids, and try to be a sympathetic and loving wife. There were times

when I didn't succeed and felt like I was attempting an impossible juggling act" (157).

A tremendous sense of guilt and inadequacy accompanies this role conflict, a guilt about not being able to do everything: "Guilt and fear can do strange things to the mind and the body. I questioned my right to write, even though I knew I had to do it. I had just wanted everything—husband, children, work" (159), admits Laurence. The guilt has two sources, both involving one's role as mother. First, there is the guilt about neglecting the children themselves in favour of one's writing. Morag, for example, writes to her friend Ella, also a mother and a writer: "I feel I've neglected Pique, to some extent, recently, trying to get this [novel] finished. And I mustn't" (444). Secondly, there is guilt about neglecting domestic chores for a time in order to concentrate on the writing. Again, this is where working at home can be a disadvantage. Surrounded by dishes that need washing and floors that need sweeping, one can be distracted from the writing by thoughts of all of the many other things that need to be done around the house. Moreover, domestic chores have traditionally been given the highest value in the feminine sphere. Although Laurence "rapidly learned to put off domestic jobs" (169), primarily because her writing was necessary to bring some money into the household, her "conditioning ran completely against this" (169): "I'd been brought up in a society in which jobs such as washing the dishes, making the beds, and scrubbing the floors were valuable work for women; writing was not" (169-70). The fact that it is not only the necessity of doing the domestic chores, but the sense that one should be doing them to have worth as a woman, is emphasized by the fact that Laurence, even when she was provided with

help with such tasks during her time in Africa, felt a stab of guilt at being relieved from these responsibilities: "I looked after the children myself, but I had a great deal of help with domestic chores. I accepted this with enormous guilt . . .This helped me more than I can say in terms of my writing, but I still felt ambivalent" (152). These feelings of guilt and ambivalence, of course, have much to do with Laurence's feelings about colonialism and race: She did not want to be positioned as the privileged white woman among African servants. Nevertheless, at least part of the guilt may also be analyzed in terms of gender as well as race.

This is Woolf's "Angel in the house," the symbol of guilt and obligation that she discusses in her essay "Professions for Women." She describes the Angel in this way:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (59-60)

Woolf asserts that this Angel, which is a societal ideal that is psychologically internalized, must be banished in order for a woman's conscience to be free from the nagging worries of the household and the family and free to write: "I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing" (60).

It is not only the actual act of writing itself that conflicts with one's role as a mother; it is also the trappings of being a writer, particularly a successful writer. Laurence remembers having to go to Canada, while living in England at the time, for a month to do publicity for *A Jest of God*. In addition to the anxieties associated with the publicity itself, Laurence also emphasizes that she was being tried as a mother: "I was also anxious about leaving the children. . . . I wrote to the kids constantly and phoned several times. Nevertheless, I missed them horribly. The whole month was an ordeal" (178). When that same novel won the Governor General's award for fiction, Laurence again had to return to Canada without the children, her guilt only partially eased by her knowledge that the financial part of the award would benefit the children in the long-run: "The Governor General's Award carried with it a cheque for $2,000, a huge sum to me then. Even though I felt guilty about leaving the children, I reasoned that we would be two thousand Canadian dollars richer" (186).

Nevertheless, Laurence stresses that the practical realization that, in the long run, these absences will benefit the children does not diminish the immediate emotional pain of having to be separated from them. Her biggest challenge in this regard was when she was offered "the position of writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto" (190). She felt that she "was probably . . . the only person at Massey College who wondered what the hell [she] was doing leaving [her] kids for a whole academic year" (190), and, despite the fact that she "needed the money, . . . the clout, . . . and . . . the experience" (190), the pain and guilt at the thought of leaving her children for such a long period of time was intense:

> I took Jocelyn and David to the airport in Montreal and saw them onto the plane to London, where Ian and Sandy would meet them. I can't remember, either before or afterwards, when it had been so difficult to say goodbye to anyone. I wanted to ditch the university job and get on the plane with them. I thought once again that I must have been totally insane, if not totally irresponsible, to agree to leave my children for a whole academic year. Even the knowledge that I would go back to Elm Cottage at Christmas did nothing to relieve what I felt. I had to wait for an hour for my own plane to Toronto. It was a long hour. I could think of nothing but leaving my kids, worrying about how they'd get along without me and, perhaps more important, how I could possibly get along without them. (191)

Even though such things are necessary for the success of a writer, the mother ultimately has the final word in Laurence's portrait of the mother-writer, and the children become her top priority: The mother-writer is painted by Laurence as a sacrificial being diverting her artistic drive to accommodate her children. This, of course, is an example of how, as Laurence writes, "[s]o many women writers have, for too much of their professional lives, put themselves and their work last, as women in all areas have been socially conditioned to do over centuries" (136). But it is, she asserts, a sacrifice made lovingly and willingly, because the love of one's child, although of a similar quality as the love of one's work, is infinitely deeper and more profound: "When the crunch came, of course, the children were always infinitely more important. I could never work when one of the kids was sick. Real people are more important than writing. Life is always more important than Art" (166).

Similarly, when Pique is ill, and Morag must attend to her, Mr. Sampson, the owner of the bookshop in which Morag works mornings, tells her that "[t]he lesser matters must give way to the greater" (385). He means, of course, that her presence at the bookshop is less important than the well-being of her daughter; but this principle of lesser priorities giving way to greater priorities also applies to Morag's writing in relation to Pique, as she must give up the work she had planned to do on the novel that afternoon as well as in the days following.

Thus, with children being the priority, writing becomes something that must be accomplished in the cracks during the day in which the mother is not needed by the child. Jane Yolen, interviewed by Rosenberg in *A Question of Balance*, uses the metaphor of a quilt to describe the process:

> One has to find ways of using the little bits and pieces of time. So in a sense, when my children were young and still very much at home, my writing life was really quilted into the rest of my life in little patches here, little patches there. Once the children started going to school, I had large swatches of time that I could use. (184)

Similarly, Laurence describes how she fit her writing into her role as a mother: "I was still working in the evenings when the children were asleep. David was five and hadn't started school. Writing became easier when both kids were in school because I could work for at least a few hours during the day" (157).

But this acknowledgment of the ultimate importance of the child, and the resignation to the fact that one must take one's opportunities to write as they come, does not lessen the frustration, and even the agony, that the disruption of the writing

and the inability to do any sustained writing creates. Laurence directs us to Tillie Olsen's book *Silences*, which she describes as "heart-rending" (136), as "the most poignant description and analysis" (136) of the plight of the mother-writer and its effect on her writing. As Olsen writes:

> Not because the capacities to create no longer exist, or the need (though for a while, as in any fullness of life, the need may be obscured), but because the circumstances for sustained creation have been almost impossible. The need cannot be first. It can have at best, only part self, part time. . . . More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*. . . . The very fact that these are real needs, that one feels them as one's own (love, not duty); *that there is no one else responsible for these needs*, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil. The rest has been said here. Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be. (18-19)

Olsen points to something else in this passage that is relevant to the discussion of the mother-writer: the fact that "there is no one else responsible for [the] needs" (18) of the children. For the most part, it is true that male artists of this time were not faced with the same demands as female writers. As Laurence declares:

> This may be a major difference between women writers who are mothers and men writers who are fathers. I certainly don't mean this as a diatribe against male writers, but many women writers have known the pain of being asked to

> choose between their children and their writing. For us, there is no choice. Children come first. (166)

And she is emphatic in her assertion that "being a woman writer and a mother is very different from being a male writer and a father" (135).

This is dramatized in *The Diviners* through the juxtaposition of Morag and her married lover Daniel McRaith. Morag is a mother and a writer, and Dan is a father and a painter, but their situations are quite different. Dan is from Scotland, but comes to London to carry on his artistic work, "when the house at Cromruach becomes unbearably small and noisy" (398), leaving his wife and seven children behind. Although "[h]e feels guilty at leaving to come here, . . . [he] does so all the same" (398). Such freedom of movement and escape from one's domestic and parental responsibilities is not an option for Morag. Even arranging times to meet with Dan in the same city is a source of frustration for Morag, since any time that Dan suggests is in conflict with either her writing or with Pique's needs:

> She goes there in the afternoons, most days, which is by no means a perfect arrangement. She works mornings in the bookshop. Dan works mornings at his work. She is supposed to be working afternoons at her work. Pique does not get to bed until after nine, so evenings are not much good for Morag's work. The choice for her seems to be not too simple. (399)

Taking a lover is, in itself, a luxury for Morag, given the demands, and the subsequent exhaustion, of motherhood and writing. The children and the writing are already competing priorities, and a third priority thrown in the mix is nearly impossible to balance. This is another consequence of being both a mother and a

writer: between struggling with the demands of the writing and the kids, the woman loses sight of herself and her own needs outside of these two roles. "My priorities were clear: the kids and the work, the work and the kids" (171), Laurence writes. However, she recognizes that "[t]he fact that a woman has children and is a devoted artist in no way lessens her sexual and adult emotional needs" (171); it does, however, make the satisfaction of such needs more difficult.

Although Laurence points to Olsen, her own summary of the whole problematic situation of the mother-writer, particularly in relation to the male writer, is quite effective in itself:

> While my children were growing up and I was doing most of my writing, my main problem was not loneliness, although that was certainly an element of my life. My chief difficulty, however, was in splitting my heart and my time between my children and my work. When the crunch came, of course, the children were always infinitely more important. I could never work when one of the kids was sick. Real people are more important than writing. Life is always more important than Art. This may be a major difference between women writers who are mothers and men writers who are fathers. I certainly don't mean this as a diatribe against male writers, but many women writers have known the pain of being asked to choose between their children and their writing. For us, there is no choice. Children come first. I don't believe, on the other hand, that this has made women's writing less powerful, less broad in scope. In fact, I believe the reverse is true. If I hadn't had my children, I wouldn't have written more and better, I would have written less

> and worse. I suppose many male writers and artists who are married with children take for granted a mother for those children who is not herself a writer or an artist and who is always there, not only to look after the children but to look after the comfort of the man himself. There are exceptions to this, I know. (166)

What is most effective about this description, in addition to the outlining of the problem effectively and concisely, is that it also contains the natural resolution, as Laurence would like to present it, to the problems faced by women writers; that is, it suggests that the struggles and challenges of being a mother and a writer can be used to produce better art, art that is different from that which males produce. After all, life is the stuff of art, and it is certainly true that a mother, because of the joy and the exasperation that she gets from her children, lives fully.

Le Guin, in her search for the image of the female writer, discusses Margaret Oliphant, whose autobiography discusses her two roles: "The writing ran through everything. But then it was also subordinate to everything, to be pushed aside for any little necessity" (35); yet, this is, ultimately, seen as, not a negative state, but a positive and productive one:

> Oliphant's autobiography gives us a glimpse of why a novelist might not merely endure writing in the kitchen or the parlor amid the children and the housework, but might endure it willingly. She seems to feel that she profited, and that her writing profited, from the difficult, obscure, chancy connection between the art work and the emotional/manual/managerial complex of skills

> and tasks called housework, and that to sever that connection would put the writing itself at risk, would make it, in her word, unnatural. (35)

Similarly, an older Morag, while cursing the interruptions that she is continually faced with as a mother-figure to her neighbours as well as her daughter, at the same time considers them a blessing: "This had been the pattern of life for how long? Morag at this table working, and people arriving and saying, in effect, Please don't let me interrupt you. But they *did* interrupt her damn it. The only thing that could be said for it was that if no one ever entered that door, the situation would be infinitely worse" (372). This is a recognition that "the pattern of [her] life" involves a weaving together of her work and her life into a rich whole. In fact, this notion that the struggles of mothering may be used advantageously by the writer informs the structure of *The Diviners*, as it is Pique's disappearance, and Morag's subsequent worry about her, that launches (not only in terms of its positioning at the beginning of the novel but also in terms of its status as the impetus or inspiration for the novel) the narrative that we are reading, which is also the novel that Morag is writing: Pique and her departure are not only dominant subjects of the novel, but they are also the catalyst for Morag's writing of the novel.

There seems to be a consensus among those women who discuss being a mother and an artist that motherhood is effective material for art. Art emerges out of conflict, struggle, and deep emotions, all of which are involved in being a mother; and none of which are involved in shutting oneself away in a room. Yolen says that "any time your life is full, you have more to write about . . . Certainly children have made my life very full and very complete" (184), while Le Guin, interviewed by

Rosenberg, emphasizes that the "romantic ideal of the male artist standing in total isolation from his society—that is an unbalanced, eccentric idea which I reject because that's not how you get good work done. To me, an art grows organically out of its society at its best, so you don't cut the connection. And if your connections happen to be family ones . . . then that's your world" (245). Erica Jong, also, rejoices in the struggles of motherhood:

> I came to the conclusion that whatever was lost by introducing this great element of uncertainty into my life would be more than repaid by the new experiences and insights it would bring. For I had belatedly discovered that art cannot exist without life, and that those writers who are overcareful to limit their lives (in the hope of screening out all interruptions) often wind up with nothing to write about. (29)

Life is the stuff of art; isolation is neither realistic, nor productive. The poet Alicia Ostriker, also interviewed by Rosenberg, asserts:

> The most important thing for a young mother to remember is that children and the experiences of maternity—ranging from ecstasy to hellish depression—are valid material for art. We require artists to explore and define the significance of all human experience. . . . Mothers can use their lives as raw materials for art just the same as Monet used landscape or Dante used Florentine politics. They can record everything and turn it into metaphors. (179)

Thus, motherhood, in addition to being used as a metaphor for the act of writing, becomes the substance of writing—both the inspiration and the subject matter.

Writing can also be an effective outlet for the frustrations of motherhood. After all, in *The Fire-Dwellers*, one of Stacey's problems is that she does not have an outlet for her frustration, a way to make her distinctive voice be heard. In her Afterword to *The Fire-Dwellers*, Sylvia Fraser states that "[i]n Canada, the energy of the women's movement expressed itself more subtly and more characteristically through the power of its female fiction writers" (283). Laurence, the writer, expresses Stacey's motherly frustration for her, while suggesting that such an outlet for expression would help Stacey to better deal with her problems.

The voicing of such frustrations, in the tangible form of writing, is also a benefit for female readers, particularly those who are mothers and also want to be writers: As Le Guin writes:

> [W]e don't know much about the process, because writers who are mothers haven't talked much about their motherhood—for fear of boasting? for fear of being trapped in the Mom trap, discounted?--nor have they talked much about their writing as in any way connected with their parenthood, since the heroic myth demands that the two functions be considered utterly opposed and mutually destructive" (35).

In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence describes her own reaction to the news of poet Sylvia Plath's suicide. At first Laurence was horrified, since, like Plath, she "was living in the same area, also in a crummy flat, also separated from [her] husband and also with two young children" (162). She also admits that she "had often felt depressed" (162). However, while Plath's suicide suggests that her circumstances as a single mother were at the root of "her incurable depression" (163), Laurence

realizes that "[h]er situation had little to do with her death" (163), for Laurence's own circumstances were very similar. It is, as Laurence recognizes, an issue of inner strength and how one deals with pain and loneliness: Laurence used it to create art that speaks to other women, while Plath, although also creating art, ultimately let her pain destroy her. Thus, Plath is a rejected model for Laurence in her search for models of how to be a mother and a writer.

In the end, then, Catharine Parr Traill's model is the one that Laurence deems to be best for herself and Morag, despite the high standards that come along with it. Giving up "a room of one's own," in its literal and figurative manifestations, as well as the solitude and space for sustained concentration that it symbolizes, is, in fact, gaining something. Morag asserts that "[i]f I hadn't been a writer, I might have been a first-rate mess at this point" (12); however, this is also true if she hadn't been a mother, for Laurence emphasizes that her motherhood contributes not only to her life but also sustains her writing.

As Laurence notes in *Dance on the Earth*, "In Canada, women who were writers as well as wives and mothers have an honourable tradition" (136), including Nellie McClung and Catharine Parr Traill. The tradition extends to, and is altered by, Laurence's generation, many of whom are single mothers: "Almost all the Canadian writers of my generation, and indeed of a generation younger, have married and borne children. Many of us have had to bring up those children, for the most part, by ourselves" (130). Laurence likes to think that "in some ways my generation of women novelists may have helped younger women writers to speak with women's voices" (6), and, indeed, she has become a literary foremother herself. Similarly,

despite Morag's conception of herself as being perpetually a "beginning writer" (445), she is actually a model herself for other aspiring female writers who come to her looking for "the golden key" (33). The model which Laurence and Morag put forward is a modified Catharine Parr Traill: the promotion of both motherhood and writing is there, but an attempt to eliminate the guilt at not being perfect in both roles is also present.

Fraser states that, at her death, Laurence occupied a position of "enormous stature" (283), partly because her model of the writer-mother was so appealing to her female contemporaries. This indicates a sort of myth-making, an elevation of Laurence as an ideal, or even as a heroine, as she herself and Morag elevate Catharine Parr Traill. Moreover, Laurence could be said to be participating in this myth-making herself, through the writing of *Dance on the Earth* and even through the portrait of the artist as mother that she paints in *The Diviners*, which is, to some extent, a self-portrait.

One of the significant motifs recurring throughout *The Diviners* is the motif of personal history and how we all, very much in the manner of writers of fiction, re-create our own pasts. This idea is put forward in the first chapter of the novel, as Morag, reacting to Pique's departure, is compelled to look back into her own past; this looking back into the past is what constitutes the rest of the novel. Morag herself recognizes that the past that she "remembers" is, in fact, a construct: "A popular misconception is that we can't change the past—everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it" (70), she muses. Of course, the past is not the only victim of the innate human tendency to "fictionalize" reality: "reality" (or

"truth"), as filtered through the perceptions of each individual who perceives it, is ultimately subjective, rather than an absolute.

This idea that one's conception of the past is as much a construction or a re-creation—as well as the questioning of the concept of "truth" itself—has become a significant area of inquiry for those who study the genre of autobiography. Sidonie Smith outlines the history of autobiography studies, highlighting the shift from the *bios* (experience) to the *autos* (sense of identity): While early critics of autobiography were preoccupied with the *bios*, "evaluat[ing] the quality of life as it was lived and the veracity of the autobiographer as he or she narrated the story of that life" (5), the second generation of critics "has attuned itself to the 'agonizing questions' inherent in self-representation" (5). "For these critics," Smith writes, "truthfulness becomes a much more complex and problematic phenomenon" (5).

Morag is a self-admitted unreliable narrator of her own history; Laurence is not as forthright about her own unreliable narration of her past, particularly in her dual role of mother and writer, in *Dance on the Earth*. As James King writes in his recent biography of Laurence, "In *Dance on the Earth*, Margaret continually mentions writing and parenting as the twin concerns to which she dedicated her life; she even insists parenting always took pride of place over writing" (295-6); but, "[i]n the children's memories, the demarcation in their mother's existence was not as clear-cut as she later claimed" (200). King presents to us a Margaret Laurence who was far more artistically driven, even at the cost of her mothering, than she ever presents herself (or, indeed, her "spiritual" self, *The Diviners*' Morag): Her children felt "that they had paid an unfair price for her creativity" (334), King's reveals.

If we conceive of the rendering of reality as a continuum, as Laurence herself encourages us to do in her fiction, rather than as an absolute, King's biography could be said to be one notch further along the continuum than *Dance on the Earth.* King himself discusses the limitations of Laurence's memoir:

> All autobiographies—largely because they are by definition subjective—tell lies in some way or other. *Dance on the Earth* was never intended to be autobiographical in any significant generic sense; it is—as the subtitle declares—a collection of 'memoirs,' a carefully selected recollection of the history of Margaret's womanhood. . . . This book contains a bit of wishful thinking in that Margaret asserts that in her life she had given equal emphasis to writing and child-rearing. (375)

While pointing to the limitations of the memoir, however, King also acknowledges that Laurence's real agenda in writing the memoir, which was to "show herself as a person who gained power as a woman through the agency of other women" (375), necessarily "results in a narrative that omits many pertinent biographical facts the reader might expect to find in an autobiography" (375). *Dance on the Earth* becomes a work of art, beautifully integrating Laurence's mothering (both being mothered and being a mother) with her writing: The accurate depiction of Laurence's life and feelings becomes second to the overall effect of the portrait.

Critics who study women's autobiography—for example, Sidonie Smith, Domna Stanton, Shari Benstock, and Susan Stanford Friedman—call for a critical inquiry into autobiographies written by women that approaches them differently from autobiographies written by men. The differences between the two lie in the differing

relationship of women to language and the different status of women within the societies in which they live and in which they write about themselves. Shari Benstock, in "Authorizing the Autobiographical," asserts that women's autobiographies are characterized by a decentering of self, an inherent recognition of the limitations of self-representation that male autobiographies attempt to mask:

> The whole thrust of such works [traditional male autobiographies] is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations, and blind spots. The consciousness behind the narrative 'I' develops over time, encompassing more and more of the external landscape and becoming increasingly aware of the implications of action and events, but this consciousness—and the 'I' it supports—remains stable. The dissection of self-analysis premises the cohesion of a restructured self. Any hint of the disparate, the disassociated, is overlooked or enfolded into a narrative of synthesis. (20)

"[T]he measure to which 'self' and 'self-image' might not coincide, can never coincide in language" (15), is not taken into account either in the writing or in the reading of such autobiographies. Benstock suggests that in autobiographies written by women, however, the divided self, or what she calls the "decentered" (20) self, and the "fissures of discontinuity" (20) that are inherent in the autobiographical form are highlighted: "The instability of this subject is nowhere more apparent than in woman's writing . . . writing that puts into question the most essential component of the autobiographical—the relation between 'self' and 'consciousness'" (21).

Laurence's own illusion of "self"—a self that she presents in *Dance on the Earth* and a self that King suggests she liked to believe was reality—is shattered by King's biography: While she presents to her readers a Margaret Laurence who was equally a devoted mother and a diligent writer, and content to be so, King reveals that she was not as willing to sacrifice her writing to the needs of her children as she asserts. Her role as mother, and her relationship with her children, is characterized by a certain ambivalence, an ambivalence that is suggested in *Dance on the Earth* by her depiction of the frustrating conditions that children create for the female writer, but is ultimately suppressed in that same work by her conclusion that she was "blessed" (222) with both her children and her work. This maternal ambivalence, however, proclaims itself in King's biography and surfaces, to some extent, in *The Diviners*.

Susan Suleiman discusses the issue of maternal ambivalence—particularly as it characterizes the female writer—at some length in her essay "Writing and Motherhood." She asserts that psychoanalysis has posited theories of motherhood that construct the mother-figure as a willingly sacrificial being:

> According to Helen Deutsch, the sine qua non of normal motherhood is 'the masochistic-feminine willingness to sacrifice'—a sacrifice made easy by the impulse of maternal love, whose 'chief characteristic is tenderness. All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman's personality are suppressed and diverted by this central emotional expression of motherliness.' (353)

While psychoanalysis accounts for the child's feelings of resentment and ambivalence towards the parent, it fails to recognize the reciprocal ambivalence that a woman may feel toward her children: Although psychoanalysis claims that the only

tragedy of motherhood is that one's children will eventually grow up, "[t]he notion that another tragedy of motherhood may lie in the conflict between the mother's desire for self-realization—a self-realization that has nothing to do with her being a mother—and the child's need for her selflessness seems never to have entered the psychoanalysts' mind" (355-56). One form of self-realization is becoming a writer, and, indeed, Suleiman focuses on the writer and her relationship to her children, a relationship which is characterized by ambivalence.

Maternal ambivalence is something which Laurence acknowledges explicitly in *The Fire-Dwellers*: "They nourish me and yet they devour me, too" (20), Stacey says about her four children. However, such ambivalence is not made as explicit in regard to either herself or Morag—the mother-writers, although it is suggested by Laurence's depiction—in both *Dance on the Earth* and *The Diviners*—of the struggles that a female writer faces, struggles that have much to do with the presence of her children.

In *The Diviners*, Pique's ambivalence toward her mother is, in the tradition of psychoanalytic theory, well-dramatized: "*Can't you see I despise you? Can't you see I want you to go away? You aren't my mother. I haven't got a mother*" (111), Pique tells Morag at one point. Morag's reciprocal ambivalence toward Pique is suppressed; however, it does surface to some extent. One of the most obvious manifestations of Morag's ambivalence about her daughter's presence in her life is the recurring motif of abortion (a motif that is noted by Di Brandt), the act of making a child absent. Of course, Morag never has an abortion herself, and much of her stunned and sad reactions to the abortions that other women—Eva Winkler, the

heroine of Morag's novel *Spear of Innocence*, and Fan Brady—have serves to characterize her as a willing and sacrificial mother; in other words, the women who abort serve, in part, as contrast to Morag, who loves and wants her child. Morag's preoccupation with the act, however, indicates that perhaps, at some level, the "making child absent" that abortion entails is a subconscious desire for her.

Maternal ambivalence is also revealed to be a factor in Laurence's own life. Although King never denies that Laurence was, overall, a loving mother who wanted her children, he reveals that Laurence's children felt that their mother sometimes thought of them as burdens hindering her writing career. King suggests, provocatively, that Laurence, in addition to mothering her children and her books, mothered herself through her writing: "Writing was the consistent way in which she had coped creatively with the losses she had endured as a young child—it allowed her to mother herself" (273). The question then arises of how a woman who was mothering both herself and her books would be able to summon the energy to also effectively mother her children. King's conclusion is that she was not able to do so in the way she would have liked. The account of Laurence's relationship with her children that he provides is one that is characterized by extreme anxiety, ambivalence, and sometimes even violence on the part of Laurence:

> [Margaret] could be harsh with [David]. Years afterward, [she] still regretted 'the fact that I once . . . hit my son on the face so hard that his nose bled.' She once washed Jocelyn's mouth out with soap and if she became angry at her daughter when brushing her hair, she sometimes tugged too hard. To the children, their mother often seemed in a fury; they saw her perform many

> routine domestic actions hurriedly and haphazardly. She could be both brusque and impatient. (157)

How are we to reconcile, then, the disparate accounts—in Laurence's own memoir and in King's biography—of how Laurence viewed, and managed, her dual existence as mother and writer? Perhaps it is, after all, appropriate to listen to Laurence's own thoughts, expressed in *The Diviners*, on which version of "truth" we should choose to believe: "What is a true story? Is there any such thing?" (159), Morag asks. And, by way of answering her own question, she concludes, "Probably it does not matter. [The untrue stories] may console some" (159). Or perhaps, just as a "river [can] flow . . . both ways" (11), a story can be both untrue and "true in the only way that matters" (371). There is no doubt, as King himself recognizes, that Laurence's fictions about her own life—especially about her role as mother—consoled her and perhaps even become true to her "in the only way that matters": By asserting that she was "blessed, with [her] children, with [her] work" (*Dance on the Earth* 222), she is not so much attempting to deceive her readers as she is attempting to alleviate her own anxiety and the pain produced by the conflict "between being a mother and a writer" (King xx) by painting a portrait that reconciles motherhood and writing. Moreover, her assertion that one's role as mother ultimately feeds one's writing may not be so removed from the "reality" of her life: After all, much of her fiction, including her widely-recognized masterpiece *The Diviners*, itself about a mother-writer, is a product of a mother-writer, Margaret Laurence.

CONCLUSION

"Morag returned to the house, to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title" (477), concludes *The Diviners*. The simultaneous use of the adjectives "private" and "fictional" reiterates the suggestion, running through the novel as a whole, that fiction and life, rather than existing in isolation, are inextricably bound together. This is suggested not only through the metafictional aspects of the novel—including the motif that "fact [is] in fact fiction" (33) or the exploration of the question "Does fiction prophesy life?" (332)—but also through the protagonist herself: Like the river that runs both ways, a central symbol in *The Diviners*, Morag is characterized by her commitments to both the realm of art, as a writer, and the realm of life, as a mother.

As Ursula Le Guin's essay "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book" discusses, the "either books-or-babies doctrine" (35), formulated by men but applied only to women, has traditionally either shut mothers out of the artistic realm or discouraged female artists from having children. Even in recent times, when increasing numbers of women have triumphed over the "books-or-babies doctrine" to become both successful writers and mothers, there has been a reluctance to document their own experiences by writing about motherhood: "we don't know much about the process, because writers who are mothers haven't talked much about their motherhood—for fear of boasting? for fear of being trapped in the Mom trap, discounted?--nor have they talked much about their writing as in any way connected with their parenthood" (35), Le Guin writes.

Laurence, herself, notes the lack of precedence she had for writing about women's experiences with motherhood: "I had borne two children, but women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's view. We had all read many women writers, of course, but I had found no one who described sex or birth as they really were for women" (6). But, despite this dearth of models, she clearly feels the need to describe her own experiences, and the experiences of many women, speaking with what she feels is her "true voice as a woman writer" (5). In doing so, she has become, as she had hoped, a role model herself: "I like to think that in some ways my generation of women novelists may have helped younger women writers to speak with women's voices about sex and birth" (6).

Although in *Dance on the Earth* she is adamant that *The Diviners* is not her autobiography, that she is not one of those "writers who . . . write straight out of their own lives" (209), Laurence does admit that *The Diviners* is relevant to her own life, and that Morag is akin to Laurence herself, in a less direct way: "I rank it as a kind of spiritual autobiography" (208). Thus, in her "spiritual autobiography," *The Diviners*, she writes to some extent about her own experiences—experiences which are more explicitly documented in *Dance on the Earth*—with being both a mother and a writer.

The relation of motherhood to writing is accomplished in three ways: First, Laurence reappropriates the metaphor comparing writing with giving birth from the clutches of male writers, adapting it for her own purposes and investing it with a new power; second, Laurence reveals the realistic conflicts between motherhood and writing that the metaphor romanticizes; and, third, Laurence attempts to balance the realistic and the romantic to paint a portrait of the mother-writer that asserts that it is,

overall, a positive and rewarding experience. Although this thesis has argued that the balance is only an illusion and wishful thinking on Laurence's part, it is nevertheless a significant part of the portrait of the artist and mother that she wishes to display.

Most importantly, regardless of the absolute truth of Laurence's portrayal of the writer who is also a mother, all three of these techniques serve to emphasize that, as Laurence asserts in the memoir, "being a woman writer and a mother is very different from being a male writer and a father" (135). The portrait that Laurence has painted of the mother-writer, through the creation of Morag and through living her own life as she did, is not only effective, but also serves to make the status of being both a mother and a writer seem natural—which is clearly a step forward for female writers. Thus, Laurence, in addition to demonstrating the differences between being a mother-writer and a father-writer, could almost be said to have appropriated the very figure of the writer itself for the female experience, and we might be tempted, as her son David once was, to ask incredulously, "*men* write books?" (155).

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